

“Volunteering” in development: A post-modern view

Abstract: In the 1960s, industrialised countries established volunteer agencies to send young people overseas to work with “the poor” in the spirit of altruism that gave rise to the notion of development itself. In the 40 years since, the experience of volunteer-outsiders from the North working among locals in the South has shifted the volunteer agenda from one of service, to one of justice, to one of participation. This paper will recall and examine this evolution using post-modern critiques of outside help and of development itself. It will question whether volunteers’ intentions match their effects, examine the power dynamics in volunteering, and ask whether humanistic motivations distinguish volunteer work from the normal discourse of development. Ultimately, it will focus on the individual level to examine how volunteering can contribute to transformational change.

Volunteering emerged as an institutionalised form of development work in the 1960s. It was an outgrowth of the organisational response to destruction after the Second World War, which gave rise to the notion of development itself. From the “heady idealism” of their inception, volunteer-sending agencies have grown to focus on the interface – the individual outsider working among the locals. In the 1980s and 1990s, volunteer organisations have become among the main agents of grassroots, people-centred or participatory approaches to development work.

This paper will examine the notion of altruism as manifest in volunteer work of Northern NGOs in the South from a post-modern view.¹ It will address the following questions: Has the volunteer ethos changed through its 40 years of existence? Do volunteer’s intentions match their effects? Has volunteerism altered the contents and nature of discourse in development, what Arturo Escobar calls discursive space (1984, 1995) from that of modernisation theory? What makes the difference between a volunteerism that contributes to transformational change and one that does not?

This examination is not meant as criticism of volunteers or volunteer-sending agencies, or to judge their effects, success or failure in measurable terms (i.e. amounts of resources allocated or persons trained) but to peer more deeply into their role on the development agenda. Because of their small scale and altruistic nature, these organisations are not as subject to scrutiny by media or academia as large development institutions are. Northern media “love” NGOs, writes Clark. “It is large bureaucracies we mistrust; small, voluntary organizations are our friends. It is the profit-motive that we find vulgar, altruism is noble” (1991: 52). The upcoming year 2001, designated as the International Year of Volunteers by the United Nations, also makes this a timely analysis.

¹ The post-modern critique may also be called a view from the new high ground in the sense stated by Chambers: “... post-modern theory, post-Newtonian social science and the experience of PRA [participatory rural appraisal] are mutually reinforcing. They share the common new high ground, for variously they affirm and celebrate multiple realities, local diversity and personal and social potentials” (1997: 196).

One might ask, what is the use of looking at volunteering from this perspective and can such analysis say something about development work in a broader sense. This paper will argue that volunteer ethos is a strong thread in the wider conceptualization about development work, that many individuals working in development have done voluntary work and regard such experience favorably and highly compatible with the qualities required for paid development work. It is also shown that many of those working in paid positions in development institutions get their start as volunteer workers (Smillie, 1995).

In a purely economic definition, volunteering means to work, help or assist for little or no financial compensation. In broader terms it incorporates a spirit of service, of altruism, of doing good for the sake of it not for material reward or even necessarily for recognition or praise. Altruism is defined as “regard for others as a principle of action.” In an anthropological argument, Chambers writes, “altruism is a fact of human behaviour and can be chosen... no one is immune from altruism” (1997: 13).

I. Volunteer ethos: roots and motivations

The spirit of volunteerism in the development context has its roots in missionary activities of the colonial era, as do many of the non-governmental organisations of the North (Korten, 1990a; Smillie, 1995). But while missionaries had a vocation with a clear religious agenda – to proselytize, convert and provide salvation – this is distinct from the spirit of civil service, to serve the needs of those in need, which gave rise to a range of NGOs some of which still have religious-sounding names.² Those in need were at first the victims of post-war Europe. Many of today’s NGOs grew out of aid operations that burgeoned at this time and focused on emergency assistance. Save the Children was founded in Britain in the 1919 to help child-victims of the First World War (Smillie, 1995: 37-38). Oxfam started in 1942 with a few people in England who wanted to send food to starving children in enemy occupied Greece (Poulton and Harris, 1988: 1).

Volunteer agencies³ owe their basic philosophy to cross-cultural European work camps that sprang up after the First World War too. Ian Smillie describes it as “largely forgotten” but reminds us of Service Civil International (SCI), known in Britain and North America as International Voluntary Service, established in the 1930s by a Frenchman, Pierre Ceresole. Influenced by ideas of peaceful revolution of Mahatma Gandhi after meeting him in London in 1931, Ceresole and friends went to India three years later after an earthquake occurred there to help with clean-up and reconstruction and spent years living and working with locals. Smillie calls them, “in a sense, the first non-church Western volunteers to work in the South” (1995: 40).

² For example, Mennonite Central Committee, Society of Friends (Quakers) and Church World Service are inspired by Christian values but work in secular humanist rather than religious tradition.

³ “Volunteer” agencies refers to volunteer-sending agencies. “Voluntary” agencies is used in a more general sense; it includes NGOs like Oxfam that recruit volunteers for their work in the North.

It was more than twenty years later that many agencies which still send volunteers today were established. Britain's Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO) was founded in 1957 and Canadian University Service Overseas (CUSO) in 1960 under the motto to "serve and learn." Larger scale institutionalization of volunteers came in the form of American Peace Corps established by the government of President John F. Kennedy in 1961. In the next twenty-five years it would send 120,000 Americans to work in low-income countries (Smillie, 1995: 41). Germany, other European and Scandinavian countries, and Japan joined them in the following decades, setting up private or non-governmental organizations to send volunteers overseas.⁴ In 1970 the UN agency, United Nations Volunteers, was founded as an "operational partner" to the United Nations Development Programme. About 20,000 people have served as UNVs in the ensuing 25 years. They cross the geographic North/South divide of the other agencies, with 30 percent from industrialized countries and 70 percent from developing countries (UNV website).

Discussing motivations that are other than concrete and measurable is tricky, considering the tendency in academia to examine societies and institutions from strictly political and economic perspectives. But the values that compel people to volunteer are integral to the present discussion. In addition the former approach, while in the interest of intellectual rigour, can pre-empt such discussion and thereby miss an opportunity to deeply explore and understand human motivation. Korten writes: "Development has long been treated as primarily a financial and technical problem. The importance of values has generally been neglected. This neglect contributes to many of the current global crises..." (1990a: 223).

Within the complex web that make up the humanitarian impulse, Smillie points out threads of altruism, conscience, guilt, shame, and fear related to self-interest (1995:27-28). Of the initial impetus that led volunteers to serve, former Canadian volunteer Tim Brodhead, writes: "Development? We'd achieve it by teaching, by bandaging, by precept and example. The poor and downtrodden would soon see there was another method of doing things, a *better* method... we were remarkably ill-equipped as we entered the development battle armed with our skill, crisp degrees and a few weeks of orientation" (1997). This top-down transfer of knowledge fitted the conventional modernising school of thought – helping poor communities become more like the North by adopting Northern ideas. The struggle was concentrated on building infrastructures to help the poor in their fight against injustice. Volunteers were often recent graduates and it was assumed these young, motivated persons would achieve much in the public sectors of education and health in Third World countries (Clark, 1991; Baker, 1996). The poor were largely a passive, undifferentiated mass.

⁴ List of active voluntary agencies included at end (Appendix A)

II. Altruistic intentions versus effects

Because little emphasis was placed on language skills and cultural adaptation of volunteers they often ended up serving privileged sectors of the society rather than the grassroots. They remained oblivious to indigenous structures and village committees. The result was a frustrated idealism which led to questioning and through feedback mechanisms ultimately to transformation of the “typical” volunteer to an older, more experienced person who had more specialized skills and worked on a project rather than in the public sector (Baker, 1996: 99-100).

Intellectuals of the South came up with critiques in this period, Brazilian educator Paulo Freire’s being one that voluntary organizations picked up. His book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* published in 1970, elucidated a view from the poor about the humanist intentions of development:

“Whatever the specialty that brings them into contact with the people, they are almost unshakably convinced that it is their mission to ‘give’ the latter their knowledge and techniques. They see themselves as ‘promoters’ of the people. Their programs of action include their own objectives, their own convictions... they do not listen to people, but instead plan to teach them how to “cast off the laziness which creates underdevelopment.” (1970: 136)

Attempting to liberate the poor without their participation is to “lead them into the populist pitfall and transform them into masses which can be manipulated,” wrote Freire (1970: 47). He explains that pedagogic method, as action *with* or transformation *with*, and not *to*, must be achieved through a respectful dialogue that allows a process of conscientisation, meaning an awakening of consciousness through developing a critical awareness of one’s own identity and situation. Anarchist critic of development and requisite schooling, Ivan Illich, wrote of the “benevolent production” of education and commodities in the North creating underdevelopment in the South. “... The dynamic underdevelopment that is now taking place is the exact opposite of what I believe education to be: the awakening awareness of new levels of human potential and the use of one’s creative powers to foster human life” (1969: 166).

Later analysis from anti-development critiques or postmodern perspectives reinforced that the naivete and idealism of volunteers played into the will of the politically and economically powerful to promote a Northern-biased development agenda and dependency of the south. It seems objective to state that Northern volunteer organizations were set up as a practical modality of distributing aid resources, money and technical assistance. But deconstruction of power dynamics show they were also set-up in the protection of national interest and political control, writes professor of international relations, Pierre de Senarclens. Of the impetus behind creation of the American Peace Corps, he writes: “...the balance of fear obliged the superpowers to play out their conflicts in the Third World countries, President Kennedy launched the Alliance for Progress project in Latin America, which was soon reinforced by the Peace Corps...” (1988: 197).

Using Foucauldian analysis we might be more explicit about where the intentions of volunteers lie in the power dynamics of development. Volunteers did not set out to support what critics call the

“development elites.” They defined themselves, as did many oppositional movements that arose in the West in the 1960s, as outside and even against the establishment. They fell into what Michel Foucault terms the “local cynicism of power.” Here actors have a measure of consciousness about what they are doing and can articulate it, but it does not follow that the broader consequences of these local actions are coordinated (Rabinow and Dreyfus, 1982). Volunteers themselves required conscientisation, to use Freire’s term, about the role their intentions led them to play, a wider awareness which the oppressed would have to bring them to: “This then is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well” (1970: 26).

The overall objective of development emerged historically then, taking particular forms, one of which was volunteer work. Will and calculation were involved, as is shown in the intentionality and humanistic motivation of volunteers. The overall effect however, escaped their intentions. As Foucault phrases it in Rabinow and Dreyfus, “People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don’t know is what what they do does” (1982: 187).

Volunteering and its institutionalization in the North framed the people it wanted to serve as an “Other,” a form other than themselves, implicitly needing help and unable to help themselves. This framing of the Other became part of the systematisation of relationships that created the Third World as an entity in dire need of help. Though this relationship was created with a non-profit or humanistic motivation, its effects were not much different from that created by a for-profit capital formation motivation (Escobar 1984, 1995).

III. Oppositional pulls: people-centred and professional

There was a gradual realisation within voluntary agencies that poverty was political in nature. Critics in the North began to point out that the battleground against poverty was in the North/West itself. In a 1977 study of the political behaviour of voluntary development agencies, Jorgen Lissner focused his analysis on the political role of voluntary aid agencies in their home countries because research in the North had to that point been focused on the problems “out there.” He writes:

“...many of the problems of the low-income countries originate in and are sustained by factors and policies in the high-income nations; and that many (but not all) of the governmental and voluntary aid efforts ‘out there’ are of little use unless those root causes located within the high-income countries are tackled simultaneously.” (Lissner, 1977: 10)

His immediate disclaimer afterwards, “If this assumption is invalid, then much of this study is misdirected,” indicates a trepidation in his claim at the time. His subsequent research on conscientisation of people in high-income countries about foreign aid confirms notions of aid recipients as poor, as other than themselves, as far away “out there,” as either responsible for their own poverty or victims of blind social forces (1977: 158-159).

In the 1980s, the service agenda of volunteer agencies was partially transformed into the “justice” agenda with terms like “social justice” and “forging global alliances” entering their mission statements.

One effect of institutionalization of the volunteering in the North, and the resultant “othering” of the South, is that it obscured indigenous and ever-present voluntary ethics and altruism inherent in kinships and communities in the South. Voluntary organizations strove to change this and become people-centred, began using participatory techniques, began to look for and support indigenous social movements and village structures working for change (Clark, 1991; CUSO, 1997). In 1993, UNV began a national volunteers programme, (NUNV) and a 1995 review found their efforts enhancing especially when combined with international UNVs. Their numbers are still small however, partly because education and expertise of nationals must meet Western standards (UNV website).

Looking at ten years of experience in this new type of volunteering, Randall Baker states that outsider-volunteers working in the South see themselves as filling the less visible, but critical niches especially among the more disadvantaged, remote or powerless areas of the South. But volunteer jobs that meet criteria of “cooperation, non-polarization, self-education, and working-oneself-out-of-a-job” is a challenge at best. Still volunteers maintain a distinction from other outsider development workers because they are perceived as motivated by “some degree of idealism, or humanism” (Baker, 1996: 103).

In the state vs. agency debate entering development, volunteering is high on agency, on the potential for the individual “making a difference.” People, rather than grand economic theories are its focus. It purports small-scale incremental change rather than the large sweeping cures that modernisation promised. It also appreciates knowledge as locally constructed. Volunteers in the 1990s are imbued with the need for “cultural sensitivity” through intensive language training and cultural orientation before their posting, which usually requires a minimum time commitment of one to two years.

On the other hand, there is a pull to professionalize and become legitimate (Korten, 1990a; Clark, 1991). Conceptual structures of development like skills transfer, technical assistance and capacity building have been heavily adopted by volunteer agencies. These can be seen as efforts by those working at the level of individual interface to become more rigorous, and legitimise what they come to know as true through their work with locals to the wider development establishment.

Volunteers began running the gauntlet between the image of the amateurish idealistic field worker on the one hand and a desire to be recognized as legitimate and professional on the other for only then could their experience have value and influence with other development organizations, and with governments in the North and the South. Professionalisation would counter the image that working for free is somewhat valueless as expressed in this volunteer testimonial: “I will always remember the reaction of my friends when I told them I was becoming a volunteer... dismissive and disdainful in a way which insinuated that experiencing a different culture would be of no value...” writes a VSO volunteer on the International Year of Volunteers website. Chambers writes of a new professionalism that participatory and people-centred approaches can contribute to creating. He states that altruism is putting the last first, but the new professionalism must go further by putting the first

last (Chambers, 1997: 211). In this sense volunteering, combining these oppositional pulls, contributes to the new professionalism.

IV. Has volunteering altered discourse in development?

The question then becomes has volunteering altered discursive space in development in the ensuing 40 years since its inception? Discourse here is used the Foucauldian sense employed by Escobar, meaning the systematised structure of what is said, discussed, and named in a field of work, wherein power and knowledge are joined together (1984:379). If development was, and as Escobar puts it, continues to be a top-down, ethnocentric approach, which treats people and cultures as “abstract concepts, statistical figures to be moved up and down charts of ‘progress’ ” is volunteer work part of that same discursive architecture or does it forge an area beyond it (1995: 44)? In his view, forms of power act by normalization, “not by ignorance but by controlled knowledge, not by humanitarian concern but by the bureaucratization of social action” (1984: 388). He argues that discourse in development has not fundamentally altered since its inception and in spite of a series of structural changes. “... The architecture of the discursive formation laid down in the period 1945-55 has remained unchanged... the succession of development strategies and substrategies up to the present always within the confines of the same discursive space...” (1995: 42).

Analysis of the rhetoric put out by voluntary agencies would tend to confirm this. There is evidence of structural change and an attempt at changing discourse but it is yet at a superficial level and not deeply grasped. The idea that volunteers will learn much from the South, from the community they are working in, is included in the discourse a general sense. “By volunteering for Oxfam you will help us to help others and it can help you,” says a brochure of this NGO that recruits volunteers to work in shops in the North selling goods made by local development projects in the South. VSO’s recruitment materials call its work a “two-way” process and a “partnership.” Volunteers work “in ways which are designed to help individuals develop, whether by working alongside and sharing ideas and different ways of working or by direct training in particular skills” (VSO website). But little is made explicit about what the volunteer will learn beyond a generalised appreciation of foreign people in a foreign place. Volunteer testimonials also make reference to how much is learned. “The West’s greatest weakness is believing that it can learn nothing from less developed cultures,” writes Matthew Perrement, VSO volunteer in China, but again what the West actually must learn is not made explicit (IYV website).

The Canadian agency CUSO has gone to some lengths to change its discourse in ways that indicate a greater degree of depth. CUSO no longer calls its recruits “volunteers” but “cooperants,” and employs locals as field staff, called “partners,” to work alongside cooperants. In the 1970s, it shifted its management and administration to regional offices and in Latin America and Africa shifted focus from placing cooperants in government positions to activities with local groups and organizations whose members were often involved in regional politics (CUSO, 1997). Adopted from

the work of Korten, CUSO describes its roles as evolving from “doers” in the 1960s, to “mobilizers” in the 1970s, to “catalysts, facilitators, and intermediaries,” in the 1980s, to “participants, activists, educators and advocates” in the 1990s (1990a: 117).

Even with such changes in discourse however, the framing of locals in the South as the Other, the one needing help, remains largely the same. What the volunteer-Northerners have learned, or need to learn to improve, or mitigate problems of poverty in their own societies and communities is not specified. They are not “othered.” Only the South remains the Other. Perhaps this is because it is difficult to articulate what is learned within the reductionist frameworks offered by normal professional bureaucracies, businesses and academia. What one has learned or how one has been deeply or personally changed is inappropriate, or more accurately, has no appropriate place, in the discursive space offered by the normal structures of Northern societies, “normal” in the sense used by Chambers (1993, 1997). Ghandi said, “True education addresses the intellect, the heart and the body, as it ensures coordination and harmony amongst them,” quoted in Rahnema (1997a: 121). In normal professional structures, a focus on the heart can lead to marginalisation. Do-gooders and bleeding hearts are mistrusted and are often regarded as naïve or hypocritical or both (Smillie, 1995: 29).

The other possibility is that by making explicit that which is inherently implicit, it is altered, even corrupted, losing its authenticity and thereby its meaning. Karen Lehman describes this in her essay, “Protecting the Space Within:” “... to attempt to make visible that which is seen, institutional that which is informal, valuable that which is priceless, profitable that which is useful and to structure that which is related, is to shrink the space within, destroying its beauty and its usefulness” (1996: 354). With this one can argue that the process of institutionalising volunteering corrupted it from its informal roots where people of the same community would help one another for free.

Also in this vein, it is arguable that volunteerism does not travel well, says Smillie (1995: 60). Language, communications and cultural differences can be a Pandora’s box, unleashing disruptive forces that are ultimately immeasurable. Even those organisations that support local alliances “can not avoid imposing their views of development and their priorities since they have their funders, donor agencies in Northern countries to answer to” (1995: 61). In a discussion 26 years after publication of his initial critique of development, Ivan Illich raises the issue of power and powerlessness lying in motivations to do good: “...The social responsibility that once motivated us was itself the result of a belief in the same progress that spawned the idea of development. Social responsibility, we now know, is but the soft underbelly of a weird sense of power through which we think ourselves capable of making the world better” (Illich and Rahnema, 1997: 108).

On a more positive note, David Korten, American specialist on non-profit voluntary movements, sees volunteerism as central to societal and indeed global developmental transformation. Societal transformation must come from the leadership of “individual citizen volunteers whose values and sense of their own empowerment free them from dependence on conventional economic and political rewards” (1990b: 172). Raising the consciousness of the global citizenry and mobilizing people’s

inherent capacity for voluntary action may be “the single most important task” for professional development workers. This transformational change brought about by citizen action is not the auspices of the North or the South but of “voluntary organizations of all nationalities,” writes Korten (1990b: 172). This presumably is not an urge to mimic the modernity of the West, but includes forms of democracy and citizen activism indigenous to many preliberal and premodern societies (Swift, 1999).

V. Volunteerism that contributes to transformational change

If you've come to help me, you're wasting your time... But if you've come
because your liberation is bound with mine, then let us go together.
- Aboriginal Woman⁵

What makes the difference then, between a volunteerism that contributes to transformational change and one that does not?

The answer to this question will be filtered through two aspects. First, volunteer action that transforms rejects the notion of an Other, or the subject/object paradigm, in favour of a subject/subject construction of discourse, and creates what Escobar calls a counter-discourse (1984: 392). The ability to do this depends largely on the critical consciousness of the volunteer. Therefore the second aspect expands on the process of conscientisation and perspective transformation.

For volunteer-sending agencies, the working environment volunteers are placed in aims to foster subject/subject interaction and discourse. Volunteers often live as a single outsider in a community, sometimes in remote areas, and therefore depend on local people and networks for daily living requirements and social life. Volunteers are given training and encouraged to learn the local language. When outsiders speak local languages, power of locals is reinforced whereas if locals must speak the outsider's language, the opposite occurs. The minimal living allowance of volunteers is also an effort to keep the economic differential between locals and the outsider to a minimum.

These are manifestations of “reversals” as Chambers outlines, and part of efforts to put the first last, to “disempower uppers” (1997: 234-35). Volunteer agencies' innovation of such reversals is an attempt to forge a counter-discourse in development. If volunteer's projects are

set up with and employ participatory techniques like PRA and PLA effectively, the potential for counter-discourse is again enhanced. Escobar states that PRA techniques, in principle, reject the subject/object division central to western philosophy, allowing truth and knowledge to be defined by local people making it a subject/subject approach. It is a “radical challenge to the regime of knowledge and truth that has ruled discourse and life up to the present” (1984: 392).

⁵ In an e-mailing from Nuevo Amanecer Press (N.A.P.), <http://www.nap.cuhm.mx/nap0.htm>

Ultimately however, whether the volunteer is truly an agent of subject/subject interaction will depend on their individual level of conscientisation and the actions stemming from it. Within the structural reversals of volunteerism, volunteers still often hold positions of “considerable authority especially in poorer and smaller developing countries” (Baker, 1996: 102). Individual qualities, such as race and sex will also determine their level of authority and power. Depending on their posting, volunteers may be in a good position to be “subverters from above” or within, as invoked by the Archbishop of São Paulo, Brazil, Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns, (in Rahnema, 1997b: 396). Such forms of co-action or solidarity come alive when individuals act against the principles officially upheld by institutions that perpetuate poverty and oppression (1997b: 395). The volunteer must discern the elements in their environment that play into the “cynicism of power” Foucault describes which perpetuate development’s discourse of domination, and then determine what action will reverse this or liberate them from this pattern. Note that this is a self-liberation as indicated in the quotation beginning the section.

Such action is woven subtly into everyday behaviour, the “multitude of small decisions and actions which together build up into a movement” (Chambers 1993: 13). It does not necessarily mean assuming an overt advocacy or protesting role. These can be potentially polarizing behaviours (Baker, 1996: 101) and can also fall back into patronising subject/object divisions. The action may be in silence, it may be in active listening (Chambers 1993, 1997), it may be in non-action (*wu-wei*) or non-intervention (Rahnema, 1997b: 397).

An individual volunteer’s ability to discern and then act in ways that enhance mutual/shared power and mutual/shared learning becomes crucial. How can they build a level of consciousness that allows such discernment? Although the typical volunteer is now older and more experienced than when volunteers were first placed overseas (Baker, 1996; Smillie, 1995) individual levels of consciousness will naturally vary a great deal. Each person acquires their way of being and perspective on the world unconsciously through the process of socialisation, through relationships with parents, teachers and other mentors (Lauzon, 1997). Whatever their perspective, it must be challenged to awaken one’s consciousness. If the process of perspective transformation works in three broad stages as outlined by Mezirow, then volunteering offers an excellent context for such transformation:

- 1) Alienation from prior roles;
- 2) Reframing of new perspective and restructuring of one’s conception of reality and one’s place in it;
- 3) Reengagement with life on new terms dictated by the new meaning perspective, leading to a reintegrating into society (quoted in Lauzon, 1997: 25).

To act outside the cynicism of power and realize “what what one does does,” requires a critical consciousness built through the constant dialectical action and reflection (or praxis), and dialogic communication (Freire, 1970) within this process of perspective transformation. Attitudes and behavioural strategies and tactics Chambers offers for the new professional, like “learning to learn”

and “failing forward,” (1997: 228-237) also build and result from growing critical consciousness. Lauzon writes, with a developed critical consciousness, one understands the nature of forces that have shaped one’s life. There is an awareness of “forces that shape oppressive structures in the form of cultural action” and subsequent “denunciation of dehumanizing structure which leads to action for transforming the creation of a new reality” (Lauzon, 1995: 131).

The volunteer-local interface is likely to be characterised by discrepancies in values, interests, knowledge and power, the result of two different “life-worlds” intersecting (Long and Villarreal, 1993:147). Shifts in consciousness for the volunteer will be accompanied by feelings of conflict, failures, resistance, disorientation and grieving to which they must surrender (Lauzon, 1997: 33-34). Getting through these stages and acting beyond old norms and in a new subject/subject discourse demands “vision, guts and the will” (Chambers, 1997: 236). Rahnema recommends tough questioning of the self and says before any act of intervention in other’s lives one should first intervene in one’s own. He offers questions to explore like: “What prompts me to intervene? Is it friendship, compassion, the ‘mask of love’ or an unconscious attempt to increase my powers of seduction? Have I done everything I could to assess the usefulness of my intervention? And if things do not proceed as I expect them am I ready to face the full consequences of my intervention (1997: 397)?”

Freire wrote of authentic personal introspection as a life-changing phenomenon: “Those who authentically commit themselves to the people must reexamine themselves constantly... conversion to the people requires a profound rebirth. Those who undergo it must take on a new form of existence; they can no longer remain as they were” (1970: 42-43). The manifestation of such an existence at the individual level is then the seed from which all truly transformational change blooms.

Conclusion

“What then is the substance of the matter? What could change the direction of today’s civilization? It is my deep conviction that the only option is a change in the sphere of the spirit, in the sphere of human conscience...”

- Václav Havel, “The Divine Revolution,” 1998

In conclusion we can say that volunteer work in development, and the humanism that distinguishes it, has made attempts to change discursive practice and the power and knowledge inherent in it. But this change is as yet superficial. Volunteering began in the modernisation paradigm as all development work, and in the 40-ensuing years has begun to reject the “othering” of locals but commitment to this counter-discourse must deepen manifold, especially at the level of personal consciousness.

Personal qualities are not a popular area of discussion or research in development, mainly because they are largely unmeasurable by scientific method.⁶ Yet that personal development has no

⁶ In my research, I came across no systematic study of successful and unsuccessful voluntary placements by an independent source. *Guardian Weekly* Letters to the Editor (Appendix B) give a

place in the array of discourse on development studies leaves a kind of gaping hole, not in the least because a focus on the personal increases individual accountability. Authors who prescribe transformational change repeat the need for self-critical awareness and reflection (Chambers, 1993, 1997; Clark, 1991; Edwards, 1999, Korten, 1990a) and while this must be woven into institutional and organizational structures, it can often live or die at the personal level. Edwards writes:

“The intertwining of the personal, the institutional, and the political is as obvious as it is neglected, perhaps because professionals are embarrassed by talk of the inner dimension, or discomforted by the thought that operational problems require change inside themselves. In the international context, where the focus is always on the development of others, it is probably the most important lesson we have to learn.” (1999: 205)

If individual volunteers and voluntary agencies can deepen subject/subject construction of discourse, make more explicit that conscientisation is a universal human process that overcomes not only poverty and oppression in the South but also ignorance and ethnocentricity in the North, its contribution will be a more truly transformational one. It will show that though forms of ignorance, knowledge, and levels of entitlement to wealth are different for human beings depending on their family, society and place on the planet, these differences are less vertically linear and more horizontally dissonant than indices of development would have us think.

Appendix A: List of volunteer agencies in development

- Arbeit in Übersee, Germany
- Australian Volunteers Abroad (AVA)
- Service Civil International (SCI) – branches in Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Romania, Russia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, USA
- Crossroads International, Canada
- Eirene – International Christian Peace and Development Service, Germany
- Global Volunteers, USA
- JVC – Japanese International Volunteer Centre
- Involvement Volunteers, Australia
- Operation Crossroads Africa, USA
- Overseas Development Network, USA
- Peace Brigades International, Canada
- Peacework International Volunteers Projects, USA
- SNV, Netherlands Development Organisation
- UNV, United Nations Volunteers
- US Peace Corps
- VITA – Volunteers in Technical Assistance, USA
- VOCA – Volunteers in Overseas Cooperative Assistance, USA
- Volunteers in Asia, USA
- VSA – Volunteer Services Abroad, New Zealand
- VSO – Voluntary Services Overseas, UK, Canada, and The Netherlands
- World Teach
- WUSC, World University Service of Canada
- WUS-I, World University Service International
- Youth Action for Peace (branches in Germany, Italy, Latvia, Portugal, Romania)

Source: Adapted from listings of the Association of Voluntary Service Organisations (<http://www.avso.org>)

Note: The listing is mainly English-language organisations

Appendix B: Letters to the Editor from volunteers

The following letters ran in the *Guardian Weekly*, (March 21, 1999 and April 4, 1999) and give insight into the wide range of volunteer opinions about their own impact.

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