

International youth volunteering and development, a zero-sum game or a win-win situation?

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Executive Summary

Societies cannot afford to postpone investing in their most promising asset: today's youth generation, the largest cohort of young people ever. Investing in young people is an effective development strategy because it generates changes that will last throughout their lifetime, with higher returns than investments in older adults. From an economic perspective, there are tremendous opportunities to be gained and risks to be averted from supporting youth, especially young women. . In other words, providing youth with the opportunities to create a livelihood can help realize a demographic dividend.

International volunteering is an effective tool to foster win-win situations where youth's capacities are built, while contributing to development results. Best practices include integrating peer learning, adult-youth partnerships into a program model that is impact-driven and asset-based.

Areas for future development include exit strategies for volunteers in developing countries, as well as inclusion of traditionally marginalized youth.

Introduction

The question of who benefits from international volunteering is often asked, sometimes from a results perspective, often, from an ethical perspective, given the constant growth of these programs, often promoted in the market place as an opportunity for personal development. Yet, most of the available literature on youth volunteering focuses on the benefits for the volunteers in terms of skills development. (Allum, 2012). As the World Bank recalls (2008), in developing countries, there is very little evaluation of the effectiveness of existing youth programs or estimates of social benefits of youth volunteering programs or in-country youth programs. The media and academia have also focused on the recent phenomenon of short-term volunteerism, as these mechanisms tend to fall short of achieving development results. Concurrently, there is a general trend to ensure that only skilled volunteers are selected for the practice of volunteerism, to achieve and demonstrate development results.

However, one can argue that the question of who benefits and if skills development for youth and the achievement of development results is a zero-sum game is no longer as relevant as it used to be. There is no longer one predominant model of volunteering. Reciprocal models of volunteering are now part of the "mainstream" offer of programming, such as the ones implemented by CWY, FK Norway or others. The differences between the traditional North and the South are increasingly blurred, with emerging donors that still receive some ODA or traditional donors with domestic populations facing large socio-economic disparities. From this perspective, the practice of volunteerism, along with technical cooperation or peer learning, can be one of the tools used to achieve

ABOUT CWY

Canada World Youth (CWY) is a world leader in developing international educational programs for young people aged 15 to 35.

Founded in 1971 as a non-profit organization, CWY has implemented youth-focused programs in partnership with community and institutional partners in more than sixty countries across Africa, the Americas, the Caribbean and Central/Eastern Europe. Over our 43-year history, more than 36,000 youth from Canada and across the globe have participated in CWY programs.

Through their participation, these youth gain volunteer work experience in Canada and overseas, learn about community and international development, and have the chance to develop their skills.

development results. The question should be asked differently: How international volunteering produce win-win outcomes?

In other words, **international volunteering cannot be considered exclusively as an opportunity for personal advancement. Engaging youth volunteers from developed and developing countries contributes significantly to the development of young people and their social inclusion, which is a precondition to address issues of poverty, access to decent work, health, among other development issues.**

From the perspective of young people, often overlooked in these debates, opposing instrumental and altruistic motivations for volunteering does not make sense in the current economic environment. Canada World Youth's experience with youth has taught us that these two aspects are mutually dependant and reinforcing for youth, as there seems to be a strong relationship between young people's sense of how their activities benefit their communities, and their enhanced self-worth as agents of change.

Youth in Perspective – How the new generation of youth is different or not from previous generations

With an historic high of 1.8 billion around the world, today's current youth population make up slightly less than one quarter of the global population. Most developing countries are experiencing a youth bulge (UNFPA, 2014). For most developing countries, youth aged between 10 and 24 years old represent now their largest age group.

One element that can define youth, despite the diversity within this age group, is to be in transition towards full independence and adulthood. One of the differences with previous generations is that these transitions tend to be more complex and less linear. Youth now face transitions to independence and full agency that are less predictable, and involve frequent breaks, backtracking and the blending of statuses. (Furlong, 2013). Also, evidence from the ILOs School-To-Work Transition survey (Matsumoto and Elder, 2010) shows that youth today tend to remain in the transition stage for longer periods of time than before.

Youth, similarly to their peers from past generations, are affected disproportionately by development issues. (See Box 1). The difference is the severity and persistence of the disparities with adults. One case in point is the current unemployment crisis, which results in the lowest economic power among all working age cohorts. As the ILO has been consistently reporting for the last seven years, youth are overrepresented in the informal sector and as part of the unemployed and underemployed. As many other issues, this is not a new trend but the lingering economic crisis has exacerbated this phenomenon. Nearly 1.1 billion new potential workers are expected to look for a job between 2012 and 2020, in a context where neither the private nor the public sectors have the absorptive capacity to offer opportunities to these youth. And this trend has major gender implications: In Sub-Saharan Africa, 80% of jobs held by women are in the informal sector (ILO, 2014) and gender gaps are pervasive in terms of share of vulnerable employment (ILO,

Box 1. Youth are disproportionately affected by development issues

- close to 240 million youth survive on less than \$1 a day; and more than 460 million, on less than \$2 a day
- youth account for over 12% of the world's total international migrants
- about 135 million youth in the world are illiterate
- Globally, 45% of all new HIV infections affect youth aged 15 and 24, and HIV is still the second leading cause of deaths for adolescents
- the complications of pregnancy and childbirth are still the second leading killer of females 15 to 19

UNFPA, 2014

2012). And in all regions around the world, women still have a higher share in contributing family labour and have less chances to complete their labor transition, i.e., find a stable employment after studies (ILO, 2012).

Furthermore, the ILO (2013) highlights that one of the issues that aggravate the current youth unemployment crisis is the mismatch between youth's skills and the labor market: "Over-education and over-skilling coexist with under-education and under-skilling, and increasingly with skills obsolescence brought about by long-term unemployment." This is a critical issue, as it has a long-term impact. Youth in a situation of unemployment or underemployment are at higher risk of economic exclusion and labor market withdrawal in adulthood. This is particularly true for young women, persons with disabilities and migrants, who face an even more elevated risk of mismatch. In other words, skills development has important implications in the short and long-term both for the individual's earning capacity, the well-being of communities and a country's economy. In other words, **providing youth with the opportunities to create a livelihood can help realize a demographic dividend**. This concept is defined, according to Bloom et al. (2003) and others, as the economic growth potential that can result from a population's age structure where the working-age share of the population is larger than the dependent age cohorts.

[The case for investing globally in skills development for youth through volunteering](#)

This global trend of unemployed youth takes place in a context where shifts in economic and political power are taking place at a faster pace. As an example, in 2013, developing countries contributed half of the world's GDP and this figure is expected to grow to 55 percent by 2018. (Deloitte, 2014). This is accompanied by other remarkable economic changes such as the rise of a middle class in emerging countries and changing patterns of trade and financial capital flows (United Nations, 2013). In terms of international aid, an increasing number of stakeholders have implemented financing and other support mechanisms for South-South or trilateral cooperation, which is challenging traditional flows of aid and have fostered sharing of solutions and expertise and technological transfers among developing countries. (United Nations and JICA, 2013). At the same time some countries are favoring this type of cooperation with the view of increasing self-reliance and new donors are emerging, changing the way international aid and cooperation is conducted.

In emerging economies, while progress has been made on poverty reduction with most middle-income countries proving to have been quite resistant to the global financial crisis, this resilience, from an economic standpoint, has not necessarily translated into more and better jobs. This is especially true for youth, as youth unemployment, and gender gap in unemployment is expected to rise in emerging economies in Eastern Europe, East and South-East Asia and the Middle East. (ILO, 2013) Part of the explanation is that youth in emerging economies still face inadequate access to high-quality education and training, along with the mismatch between the skills of job-seekers and vacancies, despite the fact that the demographics of the global workforce are younger and more urban. From a perspective of globalization, the development of skills that allow youth to navigate from one sector to another, allowing them to be adaptable and resilient to economic shocks is critical.

This issue is particularly critical for women. As fertility rates drop in many regions of the world, more young women are able, in theory, to participate in the labour force. However, as their peers from former generations, young women still face barriers to high-quality education and decent work, meaning that for women it is more difficult to find work that not only delivers a fair income and security in the workplace but allows them to participate in the decisions that affect them, following the ILO definition. (ILO, 2014b). In many regions, the economic crisis worsened the gender gap with regards to the employment situation for young women. As the ILO reported in 2012, in the 1990s, female labour force participation rate (LFPR) decreased in the last two

decades for youth, and increased for adults, but in the 2000s, young female LFPR decreased in all regions and adult female LFPR increased in all regions except East Asia, and South Asia. This can be partly explained by higher education levels among adult female populations, contrasting with longer education stays for young women or prevailing pressures to undertake family responsibilities in detriment to participation in the labor market.

There is growing evidence that suggests that international volunteering can be part of the equation as a pathway to employment and other important social inclusion factors. More than ten years ago, an exhaustive literature review of youth development programs commissioned by the World Bank found evidence that youth development programs yield similar returns than formal education. Engaging youth in volunteer program leads to a reduced probability of youth unemployment, reduced child labor, lower rates of adolescent pregnancy, lower levels of HIV infection and other STIs, improved health and mental health, less likelihood of drug/alcohol abuse as well as physical and/or sexual abuse, more control of fertility for young women, less chance of social exclusion and the reduced likelihood of violence and civil conflict. (Knowles and Behrman, 2005)

More recently, the US Corporation for National and Community Service has provided strong empirical evidence to establish an association between volunteering and the likelihood of finding employment regardless of a person's gender, age, ethnicity, geographical area, or the job market conditions. This was particularly relevant for youth from traditionally marginalized communities. (Spera, 2013). In Europe, a research study involving more than 250 organizations in 40 European countries concluded that there is a match between the skills demanded by employers and the skills developed by youth organizations (Souto-Otero et al, 2012). The authors of this study claim that non formal learning contributes to develop the skills that contribute to successful job performance. Moreover, youth who have taken part in non-formal education activities in youth organizations outside their home country report higher levels of skills development for all the skills surveyed and most strongly in relation to foreign language, intercultural communication and leadership skills.

In sub-Saharan Africa, a Master-Card Foundation-funded study conducted by VOSESA (2013) looked at promising practices on the linkages between national youth services in Ghana, Kenya and South Africa and employability or livelihood creation. As an example, stipends provided to youth volunteers and support to save these funds can contribute to financial literacy, some programs are linked directly to economic growth strategies and the study confirms that youth gain some of the "personal assets" identified in the US or European studies mentioned above: building character, connectedness, confidence and competence.

Also, participating in non-formal learning programs allows them to develop networks, or "social capital", which can be helpful in obtaining information about employment opportunities as well as in securing employment. These findings are similar to a recent study conducted on behalf of CWY and SayXchange that showed that the social capital that emerged during the exchange program among youth volunteers, but also among community members, has lasted past the formal volunteering period (Mwathi Mati, 2011). In addition, youth programs also broaden the range of occupations that young people would consider for their employment, increasing their flexibility and therefore, widening their chances of getting job (Souto-Otero et al, 2012).

What have we learned through reciprocal and one-way international volunteering models?

For more than 42 years, CWY has been offering programs that have resulted in skills development for young people in Canada and developing countries. CWY is one of the few organizations in the world that offers a two-part reciprocal program with one program phase occurring in Canada and the second taking place in a developing country or alternatively, two developing countries. As Allum mentions (2012), the signature program of CWY remains “an aspirational industry-standard for youth programs”, given the opportunities it creates for mutual learning and capacity building.

The CWY program model can be understood as a series of learning components designed to complement one another and to contribute to the overall learning outcomes of the program; together they create an intense integrated learning experience. During the program each youth is matched with a youth from a different country in a same-sex counterpart pair for the duration of the program. Within the program, counterpart pairs are hosted together and volunteer together as a built-in system of support. The counterpart system has been designed to foster understanding, empathy and mutual learning, and CWY has made conscious efforts, and investments, to ensure that this system is reflected also in key positions managing and supervising the volunteering experience. More specifically, the program relies on a counterpart model to transmit skills and knowledge between the exchange volunteers, the project supervisors, the program managers, and the organizations (CWY and its overseas partner organization).

The inherent structure of the program is a way to partially address what can and have been problematic power dynamics within more traditional volunteer sending models. Moreover, in addition to embedding a counterpart system in the management and implementation of the program, CWY has built a curriculum that allows youth to challenge their different biases and allows them to recognize power imbalances and to develop empathy and other competencies that equip youth to counter discrimination. As an example, for more than 35 years, the core learning model of CWY integrated educational outcomes related to critical thinking, respect and pluralism.

As an evaluation of CWY’s 2009-2015 Youth Leaders in Action Program confirms (Teitelbaum and Garrow, 2014), from a youth development perspective, CWY’s exchange programs:

- “bring together young people in an experiential program aimed at creating/encouraging transformation in youth to allow them to see their potential to be positive forces in their communities and the world
- gives youth the opportunity to contribute to community change in a direct and hands-on way
- supports communities to create space for young people to be engaged, to learn by doing, to build their commitment to social justice (locally and globally) and as a result, also changes/challenges the perceptions that adults may have about youth and their interest in or ability to be valuable and knowledgeable community members.”

These conclusions illustrate the benefit for both, volunteers, and for their communities. On one hand, youth gain essential skills for transitioning in the labor market: communication skills, team-working skills, adaptability and flexibility, self-confidence and intercultural skills. At the same time, as argued by Mwathi Mati (2011) and Caprara (2012), the kind of programs that CWY offers contributes to developing the “social capital” of youth and their communities, which can in turn increase their collective capacity to foster deeper community development. Teitelbaum and Garrow (2014) state in the above evaluation that “having a group of youth from Canada and a local country demonstrates a reciprocal model for working together, sharing ideas and building skills and knowledge. Secondly, having this critical mass of north-south youth in a community also acts as a

mobilizing force for organizing and delivering development activities.” These elements are very important for building an exit strategy as institutional partners, adult community members and youth in developing countries increase their ownership of the program. They also have a positive impact on an enabling environment for development by influencing families, communities, the schools, social norms among others.

This is in line with the findings of interagency work in the UN, which confirmed non-formal education activities as a feasible work approach to develop capacities of young people: "Whilst changes to the formal education system are often difficult to achieve due to the need for long-lasting multi-level political adoption processes, the quick and immediate benefits of tailored non-formal education activities are apparent. (...) the immediate encouragement of beneficiaries confirms the capacity building aspects of non-formal education projects." (Aigner, 2012).

From a longer-term perspective, youth-to-youth volunteering can thus be a catalyst for youth engagement in development. Several policy and case study documents confirm that and their communities do not develop by being passive. Using an asset-based approach where youth participate in strategies to tackle development challenges, youth develop skills and agency, and they also become a “bridge” between policy and practice. (Huxley, 2010). Box 2. Presents a case study of CWY’s experience with peer learning as a powerful tool to address gender equity.

Another important element for creating win-win situations emerge when both, youth and the partner have realistic expectations about the integration of youth in larger development outcomes. For youth to succeed, there is a need to foster partnerships with adults, where adults can act as “learning mediators” and provide the guidance and training necessary for youth to succeed, while also acknowledging that spaces need to be created in order to allow for youth-to-youth learning and capacity building. In some cases, this may need access to a physical space, but in some case, it may mean favoring the emergence of a “youth culture” in activities that are contributing to development results.

One example is a trilateral volunteering model that CWY and three Latin American partners have been implementing from 2012 to 2015. . This allows youth that have led small-scale community-based development projects in Honduras, Nicaragua and Peru to share knowledge, best practices and skills related to agribusiness and entrepreneurship. An investment of seed funding by CWY’s YLA Program, and of in-kind mentorship and training by local adult partners have translated into positive developmental results in the areas of health, and the environment while at the same time develop entrepreneurial knowledge, skills and capacity among participating youth. Moreover, this initiative has been influential in raising awareness about traditional gender roles

Box 2. Promoting gender equity in Nicaragua, Ghana and Tanzania through youth volunteering

Women’s exchanges (comprised of female-only youth volunteers from Canada and overseas partner countries) are an important mechanism designed to allow a deeper understanding of gender inequalities and a more pronounced commitment to challenging these barriers.

For four years, consecutive women’s changes engaged with local community members in discussions and activities around the issues that affect both women from Canada and the overseas country women.

Youth Exchange volunteers were able to engage in processes that altered gender norms and standards of traditional belief systems that are more patriarchal in nature. This increased knowledge not only helped communities further develop their awareness about gender discriminatory practices and behaviours, it also helped them work towards modifying their behaviours and testing out changes in the way that men and women interact at both the family, organizational and community/ municipal levels.

Source: Teitelbaum and Garrow, 2014

and attitudes, particularly with regards to the economic role that women can play in their communities, and in breaking down negative youth stereotypes as productive members of their societies (Teitelbaum and Garrow, 2014).

If it is so positive, why is it so challenging to show the contribution of international youth volunteers to development?

From a strict economic point of view, it makes absolute sense to argue that investments in youth can have returns in terms of increased productivity, lower health costs, enhanced social capital, and greater individual and community resilience to cope with shocks (Perezniето and Hamilton Harding, 2013). In the case of young women, improvements in their livelihoods lead to better maternal health, lower child mortality and an increase in investment to households and communities. Policymakers and practitioners are increasingly arguing that investing in youth has the greatest impact per dollar spent. (Hempel and Cunningham, 2010) By investing in the development of essential skills and competencies necessary for the transition to adulthood and its concomitant responsibilities, as well as prepare youth to be productive, socially-conscious and contributing members of their communities, the entire society benefits. Yet, as it is in the case for initiatives for adult volunteers, many volunteer-driven projects may not respect the “do no harm” principle and at best, benefit volunteers more than host communities.

One needs to recognize that it is difficult to navigate in the different spheres in which youth can make a contribution (youth development, community impact or changes in attitudes towards youth as a marginalized group), and that with limited resources, it is difficult to achieve results in all three spheres, measure them and fund them adequately. As it is the case for seasoned volunteering programs, the sector has fallen short of measuring impact, despite the increasing literature on the benefits of international volunteering and emerging new models for monitoring and evaluation. (Buckles and Chevalier, 2012)

Moreover, initiatives need to recognize that peer learning does not take place in a vacuum. Without a curriculum that ensures that youth volunteers are conscious about power dynamics and cultural biases, meaningful peer-to-peer exchanges and contributions are not feasible. CWY has learned that investments training to break down stereotypes about other’s culture make a significant difference in the ability of youth to engage their peers in local communities in a meaningful way, which contributes to the sustainability of the initiatives. In the case of the south-south programs, Mwhathi Mati (2011) confirms that changes occur through a combination of increased learning, new affective ties and friendships, and reappraisals of beliefs of community members, which is crucial for peaceful coexistence among inter-ethnic or inter-religious groups.

Program design also needs to take into account the fact that changes fostered through youth programs may occur in the longer term, and it needs to be driven by the impact that is desired. In the case of youth, the use of an assets approach is particularly useful, and it acknowledges the fact that international volunteering is one resource that can be leveraged to build upon existing assets in the communities. However, most programs focus on youth learning, rather than on taking into account this learning as part of a set of assets, which can include relational assets (social capital) or specific contributions to developmental results. CWY is ensuring that its traditional contribution to personal assets of youth in terms of new skills, knowledge, values and attitudes, as well as to social assets for communities, continues to be embedded in programs that seek to also build upon natural, economic or other assets in the communities.

One more lesson learned is the importance of long-term partnerships with local organizations in partner countries. This allows to develop the trust relationship that permits a frank discussion on how Canadian volunteers (and the short-term funding that accompany volunteer placements) contribute to a longer-term plan for development impact including exit strategies. Along with CWY, partners can ensure that there is social infrastructure for youth to thrive (Laidlaw Foundation, 2009).

Conclusion: What are our perspectives for the future, given the current emerging issues for youth?

As many observers will recognize, the supply of young Canadians volunteering abroad will remain. The skills gained through volunteering abroad programs are skills that youth need to succeed in the labor market. So the question is how to ensure that programs improve so that they can create win-win situations. The best practices highlighted above can be part of the equation, as well as broader alliances with organizations that can provide exit strategies for both, community projects and also, for local youth engaged in peer-to-peer development work. Because of the differences in terms of perceived and actual availability of opportunities for young Canadians and for youth from developing communities, these exits strategies should be adapted to the context. For CWY, this is part of ongoing learning.

Another area for further work and reflection is the integration of youth in volunteering opportunities that have not traditionally benefited from these “experiences”. CWY has some preliminary experience working with young women, youth with disabilities and Aboriginal Youth, and the development of programs that are appropriate for these sub-groups of youth is a work in progress. CWY’s Aboriginal Program Model is proving to be an effective mechanism for skills and capacity building for Aboriginal youth, while integrating them in development initiatives as meaningful contributors. Some of the elements that have been integrated are cultural teachings and support, academic and or professional content, and other learning components that allow for transformative learning. Moreover, complementary training around international movements of indigenous peoples are proving to be a valuable lesson to build solidarity across borders and contribute to the development of more just, harmonious societies.

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