International Voluntary Service: Diplomacy, Development, Aid, or Self-Service?

Dolly Daftary and Amanda Moore McBride, Ph.D.

In a recent assessment of long-term, intensive volunteering or civic service worldwide (McBride, Benitez, & Sherraden, 2003), international service was found to be the most prevalent form of service, representing 49 percent of 210 programs worldwide. Program examples include the Peace Corps, United Nations Volunteers, Japanese Overseas Cooperation Volunteers, the European Voluntary Service and Volunteer Service Organization.

International service is directly related to international development, humanitarian aid, human rights and global solidarity. It has implications for how nations work together. In large measure, the development of global civil society may rest on the backs of the nongovernmental organizations that are sending volunteers and hosting and implementing service experiences. These organizations form bi-lateral and multi-national partnerships (Kaul, 2001; Schroer, 2003). In some cases, nongovernmental organizations are being actively supported by governments in undertaking these programs (Davis Smith, 1993). In fact, some of the largest international service programs are government-initiated (Brav, Moore and Sherraden, 2002).

What is the role of governments in the creation of an international civil society? What is known about the nature of international voluntary service and its effects? The purpose of this paper is to review the history of international service and the status of program forms and possible effects of international service.

The first form of international volunteering was arguably Christian mission work, which brought salvation and service to people of colonies and newly-discovered lands (Bashor, 1969; Purvis, 1993). International volunteering was also used during in the post World War II period as a form of diplomacy, bridging the end of imperialism and the beginning of the Cold War.

Across the landscape of civic engagement and voluntary action, international volunteering is a unique form of volunteerism or civic service (Anheier & Salamon, 1999; Brown, 1999; Carson, 1999). McBride, Benitez, & Sherraden (2003) found that international service differs from national service programs, in that it requires sustained involvement by the server over a long duration and may require specific technical or language skills (Cohn & Wood, 1985; McBride, Benitez, & Sherraden, 2003). International volunteering programs tend to focus on educational activities and human services (McBride, Benitez, & Sherraden, 2003). A majority has an explicit goal of promoting cultural integration.

Programs vary in structure. At one end are programs in which servers bear some monetary costs in order to serve. At the other end are programs in which servers are
given living stipends and receive educational expense benefits. In the extreme, some
international service programs may be construed as "service vacations" or "volunteer
tourism." Others have also found service programs to focus more on the servers than the
served (McBride, Lombe, Tang, Sherraden, & Benitez, 2003; Perry and Imperial, 2001).
This raises questions about the relationship between the server and served and about how
reciprocal the volunteering experience is (Foroughi, 1991; International Secretariat for

It could be that international service is an activity undertaken only in the name of
diplomacy by developed countries (International Secretariat for Voluntary Service, 1969)
or that it is paternalistic aid or assistance. At its worst, international service may be self-
service, as positive benefits accrue only to the servers (International Secretariat for
Voluntary Service, 1969). Or, international service may truly be a form of social and
economic development.

From this assessment, we conclude that international service has incredible
potential as a social and economic development strategy, and that the third sector may be
shaping current and future international volunteer experiences. But more attention needs
to be paid to program orientation and values, goals and activities, and training and
education of servers.

We suggest research, program, and policy implications. Future research could
assess the positive and negative effects of international service on the peoples, nations,
and cultures served. More descriptive work is needed to assess exactly what these
programs do and how they do it. There is also a role for more rigorous impact
assessments, which focus on the effects of international service for those who are served.

References

Anheier, H.K., & Salamon, L.M. (1999). Volunteering in cross-national perspective:

International Voluntary Services volunteers: a study of role expectations. (Master's thesis,
Iowa State University).

perspectives, working paper 02-12. St. Louis: Center for Social Development,
Washington University.

Brown, E. (1999). The scope of volunteer activity and public service. Law and
Contemporary Problems, 62(4), 17-42.

Carson, E.D. (1999). On defining and measuring volunteering in the United States and


