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THE McLEOD GROUP

**HIGH ANXIETY:
WHAT FUTURE FOR CANADIAN
VOLUNTEER-SENDING AGENCIES?**

A McLEOD GROUP
FOREIGN POLICY PERSPECTIVE
OTTAWA

INTRODUCTION

A recent article in the *Ottawa Citizen* offered some “fresh thinking” policy advice to Canada’s third-place Liberal Party. Some of the ideas had to do with taxation, the environment and defense policy, but there was also this: “Bulk up the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) with a focus on sending more Canadians of all ages to the poorest regions of the world to do good work and gain an appreciation of how most other people on the planet live.”¹

This is not “fresh thinking”. It is decidedly old-fashioned thinking, but it is an idea that seems to have a kind of evergreen appeal to some.

This paper is addressed to Canadian politicians and others like the author of the *Citizen* article who frequently voice the idea that it would be good for Canada to “mobilize” young Canadians (or Canadians of any age) and send them abroad to do good works in developing countries. It is aimed as well at CIDA officials who have the responsibility of judging volunteer-sending activities against other applications for funding. Finally, it is addressed to the volunteer-sending organizations that have done so much to take Canada to the world, and to bring the world back home. We refer to these as VCAs or Volunteer Cooperation Agencies, a name they prefer themselves, and one that encompasses North-South, South-South and South-North arrangements.

THE CURRENT STATE OF PLAY

Canada probably has more organizations dedicated to the placement of its nationals overseas than any other country in the world. The primary mandate of at least ten of these organizations is the sending of Canadians overseas, and three focus exclusively on youth placements, posting about a thousand young people abroad every year. Apart from these, there are another half dozen NGOs sending significant numbers abroad, and a further dozen, or maybe even three dozen, making postings of various kinds. Many of those posted abroad today are mid-career professionals. CANADEM places over 200 people a year, mainly with UN agencies and the OSCE in peace and security positions. Over its lifetime, CESO has completed 46,000 assignments in 120 countries and Canada. Hundreds of Canadian students from over three-quarters of Canada’s universities have participated in internships in developing countries in the past few years, as have hundreds of recent graduates. Many high school students go on short-term work/study trips to help with construction projects or provide services, while adults pay to undertake volunteer working vacations in communities abroad with for-profit and not-for-profit organizations.

There are now many opportunities for young people, indeed for all age groups, to get an intensive cross-cultural overseas experience within or outside of the official volunteer cooperation agencies. One can get academic credit and volunteer through internships or

work-study placements. One can volunteer for a long time, a short time, or sequentially, in retirement or as worker, entrepreneur or student.

THE CHANGING CONTEXT

Changes in Demand

Despite an ever-present “supply”, Southern countries no longer need or want great numbers of volunteers from northern countries. There is certainly no great demand for inexperienced generalists. There is still, however, a need for certain specialized technical and professional skills, notably in the IT sector. VCAs answer frequent requests for skills associated with civil society organizations—networking, community organization, fundraising, rights awareness, and promotion and advocacy.

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Changes in Supply

In the 1960s, working in a developing country was a rare occurrence—volunteers were viewed as special, newsworthy, and sometimes eccentric. Nowadays, international travel to all parts of the globe is much more common. The demand for a meaningful cross-cultural experience—a chance to learn and to contribute—has grown exponentially alongside the boom in international travel. Every VCA in Canada has far more applicants than it can possibly place, and this has led to a proliferation in the number and kind of “suppliers” of international volunteer experiences, in Canada and elsewhere.

Many organizations now send volunteers internationally on long- and short-term assignments, and on a very wide range of terms and conditions. They include volunteers from many more countries than previously—Asia, Africa, Latin America and Eastern European countries now all have organizations that select and send volunteers internationally.

There are organizations that send many kinds of volunteers, and specialist organizations that supply people with specific skill sets (the Red Cross, Médecins Sans Frontières,

Engineers Without Borders, environmental organizations, peace-building organizations, sports organizations, election monitoring organizations, humanitarian response specialists, teachers' unions, etc.). Professional groups, such as medical and legal organizations, also send volunteers on a systematic or an informal basis.

These organizations may be non-governmental like CUSO and CESO, or they may be government-run (e.g. Peace Corps or Germany's BMZ) subsidized by funds from government, or they may be based on cost-recovery contributions from participants and their networks. Some operate as for-profit businesses—sometimes organized to contribute profits for charitable purposes. Some combine volunteer recruitment and selection with recruitment for paid positions, or use the same logistical infrastructure for both.

Though most development assistance is trying to shift to a demand-driven, partner-defined approach to aid, volunteerism is in some ways caught in a supply-driven mode.

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THE RATIONALE FOR VOLUNTEERS

Over the years VCAs have undertaken many initiatives to make their organizations and programs more responsive and relevant to changing circumstances. There remain two main rationales for volunteer sending.

Development: A Contribution to Poverty Reduction and Social Justice

Organizations send volunteers to participate in programs to reduce poverty, promote social justice and/or contribute to peace. They identify partner organizations, often in civil society, but sometimes in the public and private sectors, that host the volunteers. There is often considerable emphasis on skill transfer and strengthening organizational capacity. This model fits within the development cooperation framework of the major donor countries. In recent years it has expanded to include South-North and South-South volunteering.

Volunteer sending may be one contribution to effective development, but by itself it is insufficient. VCAs must often combine human resources with other key ingredients: financial resources, research, and policy advocacy. Because development usually means systemic change, they may also work with other actors and other sectors. For example, meeting the Millennium Development Goal of primary education for all will require teacher training, funds for classrooms, money for teachers' salaries, water and food for pupils, and effective partnerships among parents, schools and government.

Learning: Developing Global Citizenship

Canadians who work in another culture “learn” and that is a key component of all volunteer-sending operations. Some organizations, however, focus on the learning aspect over the contribution a volunteer might make to development. These programs are geared mainly to young people and stress personal, professional and cross-cultural exchange. It is difficult to know the total numbers involved in these programs but they are growing. The logic is that returned volunteers are more sympathetic to development cooperation and in their personal, working and civic lives undertake activities and support policies that favour poverty reduction. The expectation—never actually quantified—is that they will become social and economic catalysts for pro-development change in their own society, as well as understanding and supporting a positive role for Canada in the world.

VOLUNTOURISM

Given the growing supply of potential volunteers and a more discriminating demand, new kinds of placements are emerging. Internships, usually intended—as the name implies—as an educational mechanism for students and recent graduates from developed countries, have become commonplace. “Voluntourism” provides opportunities for people from developed countries to volunteer during their holidays, often for only a few days at a time. In most cases, voluntourism does not have serious developmental pretensions, instead offering a cross-cultural experience that is often organized on a profit-making basis by private sector companies.

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LESSONS

1. *Effective Technical Assistance Is Difficult*

Here we use the term “technical assistance”, which covers not just volunteers but others sent under the aegis of an aid program. Critiques of technical assistance abound, in part because it is expensive, but mainly because historically so much of it has been ineffective. A major CIDA study more than 20 years ago found that while many Canadian advisors achieved the operational objectives of their assignments, “they were relatively ineffective in fostering institutional development, training, or transferring skills.”² In part, this is because fostering institutional development is a more complex and locally led process than the transfer of technical skills or the delivery of services, and these

different purposes were often conflated.³ Since then, more recent assessments of the agencies that use volunteers for capacity development have reported more lasting results.⁴ In addition, some agencies use a programmatic approach to capacity development. A good example has been work in West Africa to support shea butter production, processing and marketing. This has involved changing trade policy, improving production, processing and transport through technical assistance, and helping the organizations involved—from government regulators to producer associations—to learn from and negotiate with each other.

The early days of volunteer-sending programs were made simpler by “block postings”—large numbers of teachers in schools, say, under the auspices of a ministry of education.⁵ Teaching is no less difficult than many other professions, but this type of educational posting can best be described as service delivery, where volunteers ‘do a job’. More complex is teaching a local counterpart one’s skills—such as diagnosing illness or setting up a website. Most complex is to develop the individual, organizational and enabling capacities of organizations. An agricultural extension worker may have good technical expertise, but if there is no support for farmers to invest in new crops or markets, the knowledge brought by the extension worker will fall on barren ground. The skills, support and resources required for capacity development are considerably higher than those required for service delivery, but the development benefits are likely to be greater and more sustainable.

2. *Sending People to Other Countries Is Expensive*

Part of the criticism of any kind of technical assistance relates to its high cost. Recruitment and selection is time consuming. Airfares, training, health costs, allowances and accommodation arrangements can put the bill for even the most inexpensive youth volunteer programs at tens of thousands of dollars a head. In a results-based world, the cost-benefit ratio is not always attractive, and often it cannot be calculated at all. The opportunity cost must also be considered when a village hand pump can be installed for a few hundred dollars, and when a full complement of vaccines costs less than a dollar a head. These are invidious comparisons, of course, but in a world where aid budgets have been stretched to the limit, they give pause for thought.

Cost is one thing, *value* another. The *value* of a volunteer placement to the recipient country could be enormous, or it could be as low as the salary it would pay one of its own citizens to fill the job if the budget was available—possibly as low as \$5,000 or \$10,000. Similarly, the thousands of dollars it costs to send a Canadian youth volunteer to lay bricks in a developing country could achieve a lot more if used to hire an unemployed local mason.

Volunteerism done well, however, can be more effective than standard technical assistance, and it will almost always be much less expensive.

3. *Measuring Success*

With each CIDA funding cycle, Canada's experienced VCAs find themselves once again caught in a funding crunch with unrelenting demands for quantifiable outcomes and impact of their work. They expend great effort to demonstrate innovation, demand, and results—often to a cynical and indifferent audience of donor agency decision-makers.

The truth is that nobody can be sure about the full, net contribution of Canadian volunteerism in developing countries. Often the results will be long-term in nature, a contributing factor to positive outcomes that even the volunteer may never be aware of. The impact of a volunteer experience on Canada and Canadians is similarly difficult to describe and impossible to quantify. Thousands of Canadian teachers, government officials, politicians and business leaders have worked as volunteers in developing countries. CIDA, DFAIT, Canadian NGOs and international organizations employ thousands of returned volunteers. They form the backbone of Canada's international knowledge and its image in the world.

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What is needed on the part of funding agencies are clear and consistent *indicators* of success and a willingness to support Canadian volunteerism abroad at a level commensurate with the demand from developing countries and with Canada's long-term vision of its role in the world. An important element in the assessment of volunteerism is the value assigned to greater awareness of and commitment to the challenges of development in the South.

The complex ecology of volunteering responds to a wide variety of developing country and Canadian interests: the idea of simplifying the 'market' by starting a new government-led volunteer agency would simply stifle innovation and reduce choice. It seems like an idea fit for the 1970s.

4. *Funding*

Private fundraising for VCAs has always been difficult. They do not, and cannot be expected to have the same public appeal as other international development organizations—among which the most successful fundraisers are those working in humanitarian emergencies or on the basis of child sponsorship. The value of the VCA, however, has been well established over time, which is why CIDA has always used non-standard funding arrangements in their support.

Because the establishment of sound placement programs is a multi-year effort, CIDA should continue using the 5-year program funding model currently set to expire in 2014

CIDA's new approach to funding NGOs—asking them to compete against each other in bidding arrangements—will not work with the VCAs. Short-term funding arrangements make long term commitments—like the costs of two-year placements—impossible, and this compromises the development contribution of volunteering. Moreover, decisions to abruptly cut funding will have a high cost in terms of negative publicity for the government, as stranded volunteers and their families make their plight public.

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Funding should be based on past performance and independent third-party evaluation, not on an organization's ability to craft a compelling proposal for the future. CIDA needs to build confidence within and among these organizations, based on mutual understanding and track records. This is not about "entitlement"; it is about supporting what works.

CIDA should budget a certain amount of money for existing VCAs with good track records. Seventy-five percent (or a similar high percentage) should be awarded to organizations on the basis of their past and current performance, and twenty-five percent should be reserved for new entrants and innovative proposals. A formula of this sort would go a long way to reducing the unnecessarily high anxiety among Canada's VCAs and would help them to focus more energy on improving their core competencies and building partnerships with developing country organizations.

CONCLUSIONS

Ideally, we would emphasize the following principles in terms of gaining the optimum benefit for a volunteer placement:

- There must be a clearly stated developmental "need" from the host organization. This need does not have to be rocket science, but no Canadian should displace locally available talent;
- While short-term assignments can be useful, longer-term ones (i.e., two years or more) generally provide greater cost-benefit and a more solid cross-cultural experience;
- There is obviously a felt need on the part of some Canadians for "voluntourism", but it is unlikely to make a serious developmental contribution. If this is deemed to have an educational value for Canadians, it should not be funded from aid budgets;
- CIDA should develop clear and consistent *indicators* of success and a willingness to support Canadian volunteering abroad at a level commensurate with demand and with Canada's long-term vision of its role in the world;

- Support should be provided on the basis of success as measured by a consistent set of indicators across organizations.

NOTES

¹ Michael Den Tandt, "What a new Liberalism could look like," *Ottawa Citizen*, Sept. 10, 2012

² Daniel J. Kealey, *Cross-Cultural Effectiveness: A Study of Canadian Technical Advisors Overseas*, Hull, QC: CIDA, 1990, p. 3

³ At present, UN agencies are redefining capacity development to reflect this more ambitious developmental goal. See, for example, <http://www.fao.org/capacitydevelopment/the-three-dimensions-of-the-fao-capacity-development-framework/en>.

⁴ According to *The Power of Evaluation* (CIDA, 2005), "Developing Country Organizations were overwhelmingly positive in their assessment of the impact that volunteers (sent by the 10 agencies supported by the CIDA Volunteer Cooperation Program) have had on their organizations' motivations, capacities and performance. They report specific positive changes to their organizational culture, systems, processes, programs, visibility and reputations, and also report positive impact on their clientele."

⁵ Some governments today still import human resources, through volunteer sending agencies or, like Venezuela, through contracts with the Government of Cuba.