

Introduction: A Theoretical and Methodological Case for Examining Agency and Power Relations in North-South Volunteering Research Collaborations

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Abstract: Scholarship on international volunteering has largely focussed on the experiences of the volunteers with far fewer studies examining the impact of international volunteering from the perspectives of host organizations and communities in the Global South. This collection underscores the significance of the active participation of host organizations for expanding our knowledge of the impact of international volunteering efforts. This introductory paper provides a theoretical and methodological overview to explain the rationale for this collection and for the research that was conducted in nine countries in the Global South. In addition to validating the voices of Southern partners in the host communities where international volunteer service (IVS) takes place, this study explores the limitations of critical and normative theories and provides an important theoretical lens to build on human capabilities literature and subaltern studies in order to more fully consider the agency, voices and experiences of Southern partners in IVS programs.

Keywords: agency, international volunteering, critical theory, subaltern studies, human capabilities

1. Introduction

Host country partners play an important role in preparing and guiding international volunteers during their placements abroad. However, much of the focus in international volunteering literature has been on the nature of the experience and the learning opportunities for volunteers from the Global North. Scholars have highlighted the need for more research documenting the experiences of the organizational staff and community members who facilitate international volunteering opportunities, documenting a clear gap in our understanding of host community needs, desires, outcomes and interpersonal experiences (Butcher/Einolf 2017; Haas 2012; Seelig/Lough 2015). However, data collected by Northern researchers on the experiences of host organizations and communities is arguably insufficient for exploring the insights and experiences of host organizations and individuals

working with international volunteers. A fuller exploration of the agency and voice of host organizations requires a deeper analysis and critical reflection on the epistemological and methodological approaches that facilitate the generation of knowledge with and by Southern voices.

Critical scholarship on international volunteering has effectively highlighted the nature and scope of inequality between the Global North and Global South, and has long called for a greater focus on the agency, voice and social capital of those positioned in the Global South (Loiseau et al. 2016; Perold et al. 2013; Tiessen 2018). However, much of this scholarship has only begun to open up the discussions for such input with limited opportunities for changing the nature of the dialogue.

This introduction outlines some of the benefits that emerge from validating voices of Southern partners in the host communities where international volunteer service (IVS) takes place. Drawing upon discursive normative theory, we posit that observable information from the perspective of Southern partners often counters claims of critical theory, which may inaccurately characterize the voices of many recipients of international aid and support provided by volunteers. By couching this special issue within a discussion about the contributions and limitations of critical and normative theories, we propose an alternative theoretical orientation drawing from human capabilities literature and subaltern studies to more fully consider the agency, voices and experiences of Southern partners in IVS programs. Furthermore, we explore an alternative methodological approach geared to demonstrating the value of Southern perspectives.

The material presented in this special issue documents the range of experiences of host country partners in nine countries from the Global South: Peru, Guatemala, Jamaica, Costa Rica, Kenya, Malawi, Zambia, South Africa and India. While the content of the findings and the analytical lens of agency are important, so too is the methodological approach adopted for this study. The research methodology involved Southern partners in the collection of data, the analysis of transcribed materials, and the writing up of findings for the purpose of publication. This process was carried out in close collaboration with locally-based researchers in each of the nine countries.

The value added by these perspectives enables the research findings to be presented in a way that better situates the voices of the host organization and community staff within the historical, political, social and economic realities of these countries.

In this collection of papers, nine authors (Susan Davis, Paola Ortiz, Yanique Baxter, Floryana Ortiz, Andrew Thuo, Denis Nyirenda, Sarah Nalungwe, Claire Dullisear and R. Rajashree, each respective natives of the countries noted above) share their analyses of the research findings. Drawing upon Southern perspectives to

more fully illustrate the nature and impact of North-South international volunteering, this collection offers an alternative view to the often-dominant critical constructions that frame discussions of international volunteering.

In this introductory paper, we document how the research was conducted, and why and how each of the research articles included in this special issue have been developed. We frame this discussion within a broader debate about the benefits and limitations of critical and normative theories to explain the diversity of perspectives included in this issue—showcasing a range of opportunities and challenges experienced by partner organizations facilitating international volunteer programs. We briefly document the contributions of scholarly literature to understanding inequality of opportunity, neocolonial practices, neoimperial discourses, and other important cautionary notes about the sometimes problematic and occasionally harmful nature of IVS. However, this important body of scholarship has significant limitations in terms of how we research experiences and collaborations with partners in the Global South. In the latter part of this introductory paper we emphasize the centrality of Southern partner voices and collaborations, and the nature of their experiences hosting volunteers as a reflection of various forms of agency. In the concluding paper, we revisit these themes to highlight similar ideas and important commonalities that emerge across these different country perspectives.

2. Theoretical Framing

Critical theory has been widely employed in scholarship on IVS with attention to colonial continuities and to neoliberal critiques of the influence of market and managerialist forces on volunteering for development. In this paper, IVS is defined as an “organized period of engagement and contribution to society, organized by public or private organizations, by volunteers who work across an international border, and who receive little or no monetary compensation” (Lough et al. 2011: 121). While there are diverse forms of volunteer abroad programs, our study focuses on those placements that are carefully managed by reputable volunteer sending organizations for their development impacts and outcomes. For the most part, the critical analysis of IVS has focused on experiences of Northern sojourners who volunteer abroad, along with documenting the structural inequalities that enable a large and growing flow of volunteer “traffic” from the Global North to the Global South (Georgeou/Engel 2011; Lyons et al. 2012; Simpson 2004).

We begin by outlining the theoretical debates widely employed in critical analyses of IVS, highlighting their value and applicability but also their limitations to reflect the depth and breadth of experiences of host community partners who may not feel implicated in, or “victims” of, the effects of neocolonialism and neoliberalism. Showcasing the complexity of partners’ experiences with international volunteers, this collection illustrates that Northern scholars can inadvertently reproduce

the colonial practices they seek to uncover when their discussions are not grounded in practical realities. Indeed, when scholarly debates employing critical theory are disconnected from the practical realities and the complexity of lived experiences of those who host international volunteers from the Global North, they may harm otherwise beneficial IVS partnerships between volunteer sending- and hosting-communities and organizations.

At the centre of the critique is the potential for critical theories to essentialize the partners in the Global South as victims of problematic and inequitable structural processes. To minimize this potential problem, we argue for the incorporation and active participation of voices from the Global South in the analysis and discourse of impacts of IVS. The examination of literature presented in this paper sets the stage for new avenues and opportunities to rethink scholarly discourse on international volunteering by taking into greater consideration the perspectives and perceptions of volunteer-hosting partners.

Without greater representation of Southern voices, scholars from developing contexts are effectively silenced and inequitably represented in discussions of development. With such an imbalanced interpretation of knowledge, whereby Northern scholars often dictate prescriptions of how development should be done, a fair and legitimate theorizing of development is wanting. It is imperative that development theorists acknowledge and accept Southern partners as fully capable of accurately interpreting their complex reality, rather than attempting to represent their perspectives on their behalf. The latter approach effectively denies Southern actors of agency and minimizes their capacity to interpret and make sense of their participation in diverse development practices including IVS.

This is not to say that Northern perspectives are not important or relevant. For instance, there is significant value in critical theory's adeptness for considering structural inequalities that are historically relevant (such as colonialism) as distinctive ways to make sense of Northern actors in the Global South. In addition, a few IVS scholars from the Global South represent marked exceptions in their use of critical theory to interpret their experiences with international volunteering (Graham et al. 2012; Langdon/Agyeyomah 2014; Perold et al. 2013). Despite the dominance of Northern voices in the comparatively large bodies of critical theory employed to examine IVS, they offer important (albeit partial) insights into the nature of the global dynamics inherent in the practice of IVS.

This collection aims to expose the other side of the coin—offering insights based on findings from research conducted across multiple low-income countries. The perspectives emerging from this research point to challenges with dominant post-colonial critiques—particularly in contexts where solidarity and capacity development are prominent endeavors of volunteer programs. This special issue draws

upon the theories and analytical framework of the human capability approach combined with subaltern perspectives (see Lough/Mati 2012; Nussbaum 2003) to challenge post-colonial and neoliberal critiques commonly found in scholarly literature on the effects of IVS (Georgeou/Engel 2011; Lyons et al. 2012; Simpson 2004). The following sections examine the current body of critical literature on IVS, and consider limitations of this scholarship for making sense of the diverse, complex and multi-faceted perspectives of host country participants in the Global South.

2.1 Critical Theory and International Volunteering Under the Microscope

Critiques of neocolonialism and neoimperialism are useful starting points for understanding some of the deeper structural dynamics that produce and/or re-produce inequalities within and between the Global North/Global South. A post-colonial lens combined with additional critical theoretical perspectives (such as critical race theory) have been the central focus of important scholarly contributions by some scholars (Cook 2007; Erikson-Baaz 2005; Haas 2012; Heron 2007). Post-colonial critiques consider the inter-dependent and highly unequal nature of international relations between nations of the Global South on the Global North (Perold et al. 2013).

Postcolonialism, which draws from the work of Edward Said's *Orientalism* and his concept of 'othering', is another idea central to understanding contemporary development studies from a critical perspective. The concept 'othering' refers to the process of establishing and reinforcing perceptions of difference between groups – differences that have historical relevance arising from colonial and neo-colonial practices of marginalization and structurally-imposed inequalities. Many authors have employed this concept to explain and critique mainstream development theories and approaches in relation to volunteer abroad literature (Clost 2014; Simpson 2004; Tiessen/Kumar 2013). The notion of "othering" is also prevalent in the examination of problematic images and representations of IVS programs, which tend to portray a profound distinction between the so-called developed and developing worlds. Contemporary representations of volunteering abroad can reinforce colonial imagery, whereby the more dramatic and different aspects of non-European societies are aestheticized, whilst their historical and local contexts are largely ignored. This polarizing approach of IVS imagery undervalues the necessary context required to understand the influence of global and local power structures for perpetuating poverty and deprivation (Clost 2014).

Aside from imagery, Drolet (2014) pointed out that international experiential learning, particularly involving students from the North travelling to the South, can be regarded as a colonizing activity as students extract learning from the "other".

Tiessen and Kumar (2013) also highlight how ‘othering’ was perpetuated in students’ perceptions of the “other”, which reinforced not only harmful stereotypes and attitudes related to race, but also reflected an internalized idea of the Northern world as inherently superior. Adding to this, Simpson (2004) argued that IVS programs engage in the contradictory logic of ‘oneness’ and ‘difference’ that are produced, and often homogenize large groups of peoples and cultures in order to make quickly recognizable and consumable imagery and information that resonates with pre-conceived, neocolonial ideals of “us vs. them” (Clost 2014).

Drawing on these theories, both Heron (2007) and Perold et al. (2013) discussed how racialized relationships between white volunteers and black host organization and community members often reinforce, rather than challenge, dependency relationships, where the former undermines the latter’s knowledge and capabilities, and also reinforces neocolonialism. Furthermore, the employment of a neoimperial critical lens in the IVS scholarship has highlighted the managerialist and market-related realities of IVS (Georgeou 2012), whereby notions of citizenship are produced through highly neoliberalist values of individual autonomy (Baillie Smith/Laurie 2010).

Through careful attention to colonial continuities of “helping imperatives” (Heron 2007), or ‘problems’ in the Global South requiring solutions from the Global North, the above critical scholarship has shaped the way the majority of literature on IVS has heretofore understood and framed the many facets and realities of IVS. Despite the frequent citation and central usage of these critical theories in contemporary scholarship, they are ultimately limited in their ability to de-colonize the scholarship on IVS.

2.2 Decentering Critical Analysis

In order to de-colonize IVS and Northern scholarship, critical analysis must be de-centred in order to allow for peripheral voices to be valorized. Escobar (2008) argued that, in redeeming Southern perspectives, alternatives to Northern constructions of knowing must be sought.

Ideas lacking a modern facade are essentially regarded as empty vessels waiting to be filled, and actors deficient of Northern constitutions sense of knowing are stripped of agency and constructed as passive victims waiting to be enlightened. Likewise, Euro-peripheral ideas are often marginalized as outdated or unenlightened.

It is difficult for modernity to escape its history of coloniality. As Escobar put it:

The idea of a relatively single globalization process emanating from a few dominant centers remains prevalent[...]. At the root of the idea of an increasingly

overpowering globalization is a view of modernity as essentially a European phenomenon [...]. There is no modernity without coloniality. (Escobar 2008: 165)

It is this history of coloniality that has historically (and presently) devalued and delegitimized other “pre-modern” perspectives or forms of knowledge. Northern knowledge is taken as “truth” while other alternative ways of being and knowing are seen through the lens of differentiation where difference is understood as inferior, backward, and primitive. “Escobar contends that not only is radical alterity expelled from the realm of possibilities, but all world cultures and societies are reduced to being a manifestation of European history” (ibid: 167). In this way, “Western philosophy traps African [and other Southern philosophies] in a double bind: either African [and other Southern philosophies] are so similar to Western philosophy that it makes no distinctive contribution and effectively disappears; or it is so different that its credentials to be genuine philosophy will always be in doubt” (Bernasconi 1998: 188).

This re-shifting allows us to imagine alternative ways of being and knowing in a way in which alternative voices are equally valued and legitimized. It provides subaltern groups with the discursive space to construct themselves in a way that is not automatically recognized as ontologically and epistemologically inferior or lacking. The decolonial option, then, allows Southern scholars to carve their understanding of how they wish to be represented rather than having their perspectives imposed upon them. The decolonial option recognizes the importance of dignity, and thus allows one to reclaim a way of being and knowing that may not align with the restrictive Eurocentric conceptualization of knowing. Southern persons must thus have full agency in considering how they wish to pursue development ends rather than having their considerations limited to purely Northern options or Northern articulations of their perceived preferences.

To be sure, this does not necessarily entail the complete withdrawal from any conceptions of European knowledge. Rather, it entails that subaltern groups can have the option of appropriating aspects of Northern conceptions of knowledge development on their own terms in order to re-imagine themselves in relation to the rest of the world. This entails what Kusch terms as *pensamiento propio* (2010), which can be understood as “losing the fear of thinking on one’s own, fear instilled by the force of colonial epistemic and ontological differences [...] Once you ‘see’ the trick, you delink and start walking on your own, rather than translating European problems into the language of philosophy as taught in America (or Asia or Africa)” (Mignolo 2015: xxi). Abstract Northern universals, then, are appropriated by local populations and inscribed with local meanings in a way that does not fully accept the abstract universal nor fully deny traditional ways of being and knowing. This decolonial option allows for the transmogrification of both Northern abstract universals and local identities.

Macdonald (2014) explores the potential of destabilizing and de-centring existing dominant colonial frameworks. The priority is not on the volunteers' learning, but on their *experience* with marginalized others – “to *be with* rather than to *do for* those with whom they work and live while abroad” (ibid: 210), thus cultivating *relationships* across difference. This requires an awareness of one's surroundings and the historical, and especially colonial, contexts within which they are situated and how these pasts are carried with us. An important component of the decolonization of learning and practice is to move beyond the Northern gaze such that the nature of the empirical work examined and the lens with which it is analysed moves beyond viewing the ‘Southern subject’ as abstract entities: faceless, voiceless, nameless, stripped of agency and reduced to thingness. The advancements in postcolonial analyses and critical theory by Southern and Northern scholars have expanded our understanding of structural inequalities. There is much scope, however, for simultaneously examining agency and the power of marginalized or subaltern communities as they negotiate and challenge these systemic realities.

Ultimately, theory should orient us toward more effective practice; as a means to an end and not an end in itself. Theory can thereby be empowering in giving us a sense that we can better and more fully understand social reality. It is this discrepancy between the expressed social realities of Southern partner organizations and the perceived realities portrayed by Northern scholars that we aim to highlight in this collection. Through careful attention to colonial continuities of the “helping imperatives” or “problems” in the Global South that require solutions from volunteers in the Global North, critical scholarship has shaped the way we understand some of the realities of IVS. However, these theoretical frames are severely limiting if not accompanied by the pursuit of decolonizing practices whereby Southern voices and participants are actively engaged in shaping the dialogue and scholarship.

2.3 Valorizing Voices from the Global South

In the 1990s, the movement towards participatory rural appraisal (PRA) significantly influenced critical scholarship on development theory and practice, and provided a lens for alternative theorizing about volunteering for development. Chambers described PRA as a “family of approaches and methods to enable local people to share, enhance and analyze their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act” (1994: 1437). This approach also critiqued top-down knowledge-generation, theorizing, and planning as inconsistent with the lived realities of poor people. In contrast with critical theory, which provides few “solutions” for subaltern theorizing, PRA adopted a highly empirical orientation to theory-building based on the experiences of people living in poverty. With this technique, normative theory-building is essentially “...experiential, not metaphysical. Theory has been

induced from practice, from what is found to work, not deduced from propositions” (Chambers 1994: 1449).

Empiricist epistemology and methodology that underlies the practice of participatory appraisals argues that the outcomes of international volunteering should be understood through the lens of discursive normative theory, which dictates that sensory experience, observation and dialog are necessary to arrive at valid propositions or theoretical conclusions. Discursive normative theory posits that top-down theories are rarely valid or truly explanatory without taking into account intersubjectively observable information from the perspective of the “recipients” of development interventions (Kanbur/Shaffer 2007). In the words of Habermas, “[o]nly those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity as participants in practical discourse” (Habermas 1991: 66).

In sum, without engaging in express dialogue with intended beneficiaries of international volunteering – drawing upon local perspectives and seeking to understand their lived experiences, wide gaps will exist between the expressions of challenge or contribution through the eyes of local beneficiaries and those of Northern scholars, including critical theorists (Chambers 1997). As a further point of departure, normative theory takes an individual or agent-centered view of power where personal choice and interpretation can be used to help explain social phenomenon. Postcolonial theory, on the other hand, takes a structural view of power that is far more deterministic and provides little space for individual interpretation or agency (Kapoor 2002; 2008).

Operating within a normative empirical orientation, and an assumption that poor people best know how to articulate their problems, priorities, and the results of international projects, Narayan et al. (2000) set out to document the knowledge and ideas of people at the local level, with a focus on content analysis to build a “grounded theory” of developmental impacts. These researchers understood that people without power are not well connected to the larger global community of scholars, advocates, and decision makers—and are therefore often misrepresented in global discussions about the impact of development on their lives. One of the three critical gaps identified in this *Voices of the Poor* research was a divide between the knowledge and ideas of people living in poverty and the knowledge and ideas of the wealthier elite that aims to represent the knowledge, resources and power of poor people (Narayan et al. 2000). This research found that the priorities of local people are often strongly disconnected from the theoretical debates and development priorities of more privileged scholars and policy-makers.

Participatory poverty appraisal methodologies aimed to engage local voices to understand whether development initiatives were helpful, harmful or somewhere in-between. Although this methodology does not look specifically at international

volunteering, the authors did assess the impact of international NGOs and government programs, including faith-based organizations (FBOs). The impact of FBOs is highlighted because faith-based volunteering is often portrayed with particular vitriol by critical theorists as an example of cultural imperialistic and neocolonial influence on the lives of poor people. In their research with poor communities, however, Narayan et al. (2000) expressly aimed to document both the positive and negative outcomes of FBOs in local communities. While they were able to document a few examples of negative impact—particularly for evangelical groups with proselytizing missions, these negative outcomes were marginal compared to the many other benefits of FBO work articulated by recipient communities. Southern “recipients” of these projects did not report feeling re-colonized or oppressed by power differences, but rather noted how such differences could be used to their advantage—allowing them to draw on the powerful social capital embodied in these people and organizations.

Although critical theory is highly critical of international volunteering, and certainly has value for interpreting some people’s experiences, it may do an injustice by misrepresenting the lived experiences and perceptions of recipient communities. In this sense, critical theory may inaccurately characterize the voices of many recipients of international aid and support provided by IVCOs and their volunteers.

Recognizing that some international volunteers become embedded in the life of local communities, IVCOs stress that volunteers play an important role in raising the voices of the poor and marginalized. In close association with this idea, innovative research projects that draw on PRA and action research methodology have aimed to understand the consequences of international volunteering by employing researchers to live in local communities and to document their voices (Franco 2012). One notable example is the set of *Valuing Volunteering* research projects (Burns/Howard 2015).

Over the past ten years, a number of additional projects draw upon empirical research with subaltern communities to document international volunteers’ effects on communities (Burns et al. 2015; Butcher/Einolf 2017; Devereux 2010; Lough/Matthew 2013; Lough 2016). Indeed, there is now a growing body of research using observation, dialogue, and discursive normative theory to provide a more balanced view of the impacts of international volunteering. Taken together, these studies indicate that Southern respondents are quite optimistic about the contributions of international volunteers. With a few exceptions, reflections of critical theory are quite marginal in the voices of “recipients” or “partners”—as they are typically referred to in IVS literature, which is reflective of the more reciprocal notion of relationships inherent in discursive normative theorizing about volunteering for development.

In order to ensure these attributes, Nussbaum (2011) argues that we must protect the institutions that enable improved affiliation and relationships, which would include international volunteering if we trust the discursive outcomes expressed by Southern partners. Normative theoretical lenses may have value for making sense of thematic and conceptual notions that inform IVS. The themes emerging from discursive normative theories on IVS, including commitments to reciprocity, mutuality, global and intercultural competencies, ethics and social justice point to human capabilities and human development theories characterized by the people-centered, participatory, and partnership-oriented strategies of international volunteering for development. Employing the normative frame of justice through a capabilities approach underscores the potential for improved quality of life across the globe and allows for the consideration of other human capabilities and improvements stemming from good health or meaningful or loving relationships that have been linked to international volunteering. Such a process starts also with the way that research is conducted and how we make sense of IVS.

3. Research Methodology

In this collection, there are nine case studies based on data collected by locally-based researchers in nine countries. Locally-based researchers also analysed these data and authored each of the nine country reports included in this collection. The research methodology employed here lays the groundwork for a better understanding of agency and critical analysis of Southern voices through the control of the research data findings and analysis by Southern scholars.

Research for the study was conducted primarily through in-depth semi-structured interviews. In three countries (Costa Rica, Peru and Kenya), focus groups were also conducted. Data collection methods involved hiring locally-based research consultants who had some training and expertise in data collection. Although researchers gathered basic demographic data on the respondents, data collection expressly drew on qualitative methods to inform respondents' perspectives of the challenges and contributions of international volunteers. In some cases, the interviews and focus groups were completed in the national official language (e.g. Spanish in the Spanish-speaking countries and Kiswahili in Kenya). Thus, hiring locally-based researchers made language requirements for data collection more possible. In addition, the early stages of data collection identified the challenge of the "pleasing bias" as a potential research limitation. Specifically, there were concerns that Northern-based scholars (themselves perhaps having been international volunteers in the past) would lead study participants to say only positive things about the international volunteers hosted in order to avoid offending the researchers and to demonstrate a socially-acceptable level of politeness and diplomacy.

Data collection procedures allowed the staff of volunteer receiving organisations to be actively involved in discussions about volunteers' contributions. A key purpose of this approach was to de-centralize the collection of knowledge and perspectives, which have largely focussed on the volunteer perspectives of their impact and ethical considerations.

The research databases comprised data gathered in nine countries in total. Interviews were conducted with a total of 212 individuals in the nine countries plus data from 21 focus group sessions in three of the nine countries. Interviews lasted between one and three hours and the transcribed interview data comprised between 12 and 35 pages of notes per interview.

Once the interviews were completed, they were translated into English (where necessary) and transcribed. All names of the interview participants and of volunteers were changed to pseudonyms. Researchers organized each completed transcript by country and entered the transcripts into Nvivo software for qualitative analysis. Using a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, nine new locally-based researchers were hired to review the transcribed data and to form their own conclusions based on the findings presented. In order to ensure the ethical use of the data, approval from the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board was received and followed to allow the nine researchers to analyze these data. The lead researchers developed content analysis training materials to prepare the in-country researchers in the methodology for data analysis. These training materials included resources and instructional videos, along with online training and consultation.

Following training on qualitative content analysis, the nine researchers received anonymized transcribed materials along with a set of instructions to read through these transcriptions once or twice, making a list of the core themes emerging. The initial themes emerging from the first readings from each of the nine country case studies were combined into one master document. The researchers then received a list of all the combined themes that emerged from the initial analysis, and were asked to re-read the transcribed material with these themes in mind. They were then asked to write their own analysis documenting the core themes emerging from the transcripts reflecting the voices of partners and community-members in their country. They were also asked to provide several quotes to back up core findings, and to write an analysis section where they explained why they considered these themes important in the context of their particular country.

The third stage of the research involved working with the researchers in the preparation of formatted papers for this collection. The editors provided the researchers with feedback on their draft reports, including consistency in terms of style (e. g. use of quotes and examples to document their main arguments, elaboration

on country context of international volunteering, and scaling back the amount of material to offer a consistent paper length of approximately 5000 words per paper). The researchers then revised and resubmitted their papers, which then went through an additional stage of editing to ensure clarity in writing.

The papers presented here embody a distinctive methodological approach that aims to decenter critical perspectives on international volunteering by representing subaltern voices that were heard and documented during participatory data collection sessions. The analysis of transcripts from nine countries by researchers from these nine offers a more representative examination of the experiences and voices of volunteer receiving organization staff and community members.¹

4. Whose Reality Counts?

Given the difference between critical and normative theoretical approaches toward understanding the outcomes of international volunteering, how do we make sense of the often-contrasting findings that appear in previous research and the collection of papers included in this special issue? As noted by Chambers (1997), perhaps the key question we should ask is: “*Whose reality counts?*”

Critical theory offers immense scope for critically examining the structural barriers to equality through the colonial continuities of North-South relations. However, as a set of insights, critical theory leaves little room for a full exploration of the views and perspectives of partners in the Global South. Alternatively, focusing on the agency and capacity of individuals and organizations to document their own experiences must also coincide with the deconstruction of systems of oppression, neocolonialism and neoimperialism. Critical development scholarship addressing IVS within the lenses of postcolonialism or critical race theory offer value for reflection on the structural and discursive constraints to the promotion of equality and human capabilities, and must be part of the transformative thinking in international development scholarship. However, critical development scholarship focusing on postcolonialism is often inaccurately juxtaposed against normative approaches or capability scholarship.

The theoretical framing that we draw upon in this collection corresponds with a decentered approach to research, data collection and scholarly writing. Building on this theoretical and methodological journey, we use an alternative approach to

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understand host country staff and host community experiences with these programs. Southern partners have not historically been the *subject* of a great deal of scholarly literature in IVS. The ideas contained in this collection highlight the need for more in-depth research to explore the experiences of the host partners who may not consider themselves fully implicated in the systemic processes that perpetuate inequality, and who may actively use international volunteerism to pursue social justice models to enact change.

Through the presentation of Southern partner voices, we can begin to reduce the “othering” that often occurs when making sweeping generalities about Southern-based experiences, and thereby challenge “the assumption of *host communities* as an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location or contradictions, [...] which can be applied universally and cross-culturally” (Mohanty, 336). Throughout this introductory paper, we have mapped how core critical theory literatures have contributed to our understanding of IVS programs both in terms of structural realities and the deeper philosophical questions pertaining to whose voices matter and how those voices get heard. In so doing, we have attempted to create a rationale and a call to action for employing new theoretical lenses and methodological approaches that will facilitate a richer analysis of the perspectives and experiences of the IVS partners in the Global South. The following nine papers are examples of this call to action—each paper documenting country-specific findings of local voices to examine the impact and experiences of hosting international volunteers from an all-too-often undervalued normative lens.

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