

Disciplining global citizens: The relationship of hosts and volunteers in development volunteering

Lucia Fuchs

Berlin Graduate School for Global and Transregional Studies (BGTS)
und Arbeitsbereich Friedens- und Konfliktforschung am Otto-Suhr-Institut
für Politikwissenschaft der Freien Universität Berlin
lucia.fuchs@fu-berlin.de

Abstract

So-called development volunteering programmes, such as Weltwärts, have been criticised for reproducing colonial relations, for instance by depicting the hosting organisations in the Global South as servants of the volunteers (Kontzi 2015: 145ff.). This article explores the question of how the relationship between volunteers and partners in the host country is perceived by both sides. The first results of a discourse ethnographic field study of host organisations and volunteers in Ecuador show: the main purpose of the partners is to keep the volunteers safe and happy and to discipline them sufficiently so that they do not hinder the workflow of the projects. Contrary to traditional postcolonial hierarchies in development cooperation, it is the volunteers from the North who are educated and disciplined by the actors from the South. Their lack of experience and discipline, however, is tolerated because, due to their origin from the North, they are associated with positive values such as modernity and cosmopolitanism, which the locals supposedly lack. The volunteers, on the other hand, have high expectations of support and appreciation from the partners that are often disappointed. The consequence is either a devaluation of the partners in the South or the reflection of their own role. This shows that volunteering in the Global South does not only bear the risk of reproducing traditional North-South hierarchies, but also provides spaces for transformation.

Keywords: North-South relations; postcolonial studies; youth volunteering; Weltwärts; development cooperation

Zusammenfassung

*Sogenannte entwicklungspolitische Freiwilligendienste wie Weltwärts mussten sich den Vorwurf gefallen lassen, koloniale Kontinuitäten aufzuweisen, etwa indem sie unter anderem die Aufnahmeorganisationen im globalen Süden als Bedienstete der Freiwilligen darstellen (Kontzi 2015: 145ff.). In diesem Artikel wird der Frage nachgegangen, wie die Beziehung zwischen Freiwilligen und Partner*innen im Aufnahmeland von beiden Seiten wahrgenommen wird. Erste Ergebnisse einer diskursethnographischen Feldstudie von Einsatzstellen und Freiwilligen in Ecuador zeichnen folgendes Bild: das Hauptanliegen der Partner*innen ist es, die Freiwilligen sicher und glücklich zu halten und sie ausreichend zu disziplinieren, damit sie den Arbeitsablauf der Projekte nicht behindern. Entgegen traditioneller postkolonialer Hierarchien in der Entwicklungszusammenarbeit sind es die Freiwilligen aus dem Norden, die durch die Akteur*innen aus dem Süden erzogen und diszipliniert werden. Ihr Mangel an*

*Erfahrung und Disziplin wird jedoch toleriert, weil sie aufgrund ihrer Herkunft aus dem Norden mit positiven Werten wie Modernität und Weltoffenheit verbunden werden, die den Einheimischen vermeintlich fehlen. Die Freiwilligen haben andererseits hohe Erwartungen an Unterstützung und Anerkennung durch die Partner*innen, die oft enttäuscht werden. Dies führt entweder zu einer Abwertung der Partner*innen im Süden oder zu einer Reflexion der eigenen Rolle. Dies zeigt, dass Freiwilligendienste im globalen Süden zwar das Risiko der Reproduktion traditioneller Nord-Süd-Hierarchien bergen, aber auch Raum für die Transformation bieten.*

Schlagwörter: Nord-Süd Verhältnis; Postkoloniale Studien; Jugendfreiwilligendienste; Weltwärts; Entwicklungszusammenarbeit

1. Introduction

Volunteering in the Global South has been on the rise since the beginning of the millennium (Georgeou/Engel 2011; Schech 2017). This includes the expansion of official youth volunteering programmes, like the German programme Weltwärts, which was founded in 2008 and is now the second largest sending scheme worldwide after the US Peace Corps (Lough 2015). These programmes take place in the context of North-South relations, a highly asymmetric field considering that the modern world and its power relations have been shaped by colonialism, imperialism, and enslavement (Bhambra 2014: 115). Development volunteering has been criticised for reproducing and reinforcing colonial legacies and stereotypes (Kontzi 2015; Haas/Repenning 2018; Simpson 2005; Skoruppa 2018). However, it might also provide opportunities for transformation: Doty (1996: 3f.) affirms that it is North-South encounters that “have both destabilized and sustained the identities of the ‘first world’ self and the ‘third world’ other” Doty (1996: 3f.). This makes volunteering for development an interesting case in the context of North-South relations because it allows the study of the (re-)production and transformation of these relations within the encounters that take place. Most research on this topic has focused on the volunteers, their struggles, attitudes and learning processes (e.g. Mangold 2012; Schwarz 2016; Snee 2013). The partner organisations in the Global South, that is, the people involved in receiving organisations and projects where volunteers work, play an important role in volunteering encounters, but have been less researched (for exceptions, see e.g. Repenning 2016; Buckendahl 2012; Tiessen et al. 2018).¹ Therefore, this article focusses on the hosts’ perspective: How do they interpret the encounters with volunteers and their own role in it? And how do their interpretations interact with the volunteers’ expectations and desires? Does this open up spaces for transformation? This article studies the relation between volunteers and hosts, focussing on the case of Weltwärts in Ecuador.

¹ Also see the contribution by Geis and Lipsch in this volume.

The Weltwärts programme was launched in 2008 by the Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and is the second largest programme of its kind in terms of budget and number of volunteers worldwide (Haas/Repenning 2018). It aims at sending young people (18-28 years) to countries of the Global South to participate in development projects. Since its initiation, it has funded the volunteer service of 35,000 Germans. Most participants have just completed secondary education (A-levels) and take a year off before entering university. Countries eligible for the programme are those ranked by the OECD as developing countries or emerging economies (BMZ 2016: 4).

2. Theory: Postcolonial North-South relations

Volunteering for development is embedded in the concept of development, which represents and has structured North-South relations since the end of World War II (Ziai 2015; Escobar 2011). The concept has evolved over time, but its basic narrative of linear progress, privileging Eurocentric knowledge over all other knowledges, has remained intact. Today, sustainable development, partnership and participation have become buzzwords that not only legitimise a wide array of activities, but also legitimise and naturalise a global order that hierarchises people and places. In the context of North-South encounters, these hierarchisations are possibly reinforced, but they are also subject to contestation and transformation (Doty 1996: 3f.). Thus, the encounters are where the actual reproduction and possible transformation of North-South relations take place.

Host organisations and projects have a special role: they accompany the volunteers in-country, including tasks like picking them up at the airport, introducing them to their host families and their projects, and preparing them for their service and life in the host country. Yet, they are structurally disadvantaged in the programmes since they are expected to do most of the care work while not being involved in programmatic decisions nor being paid for most of the work they do (Skoruppa 2018). Kontzi (2015: 145ff.) demonstrates that partners in the Global South are discursively constructed as servants of the volunteers, a relationship that represents a colonial continuity. The volunteers are granted the role of global citizens and experts on development who bring modernity and teach the Others their superior knowledge. The partners, on the other hand, are depicted as subservient and welcoming, but without agency or preferences of their own. This representation reproduces colonial relations of master and servant (Kontzi 2015: 147). However, in the host countries, the power structure is more ambivalent: the volunteers are the ones who depend on the hosts to get along and the directors of receiving projects are their bosses during their stay, which is generally one full year. In the following, I will explore how this ambivalence of power relations manifests itself in the field of practice and to which extent it contributes to a transformation of traditional North-South relations and roles.

3. Data and method: Discourse ethnography

This study uses a discourse ethnographic approach to gain insights into the social construction of reality in this field. In contrast to traditional ethnographic approaches, the entities of interest are not communities, but contexts of action, or fields of practice. For this study, I conducted in-depth interviews with ten people who are coordinators or directors of host organisations and projects, and with ten Weltwärts volunteers in Ecuador. Corresponding to a constructivist-interpretative approach, the interviews were not conducted to learn “what it is really like” to be a project coordinator or a volunteer, but to gain insights into their socially constructed realities (Yanow/Schwartz-Shea 2015: 4).

4. Parental care relationship

4.1 Volunteers as children

A dominant pattern at host organisations is the conceptualisation of volunteers as childlike. A volunteer coordinator talks about “my kids”² (Camila Díaz³) when she refers to the volunteers working in her organisation, and the volunteers are generally attributed the role of inexperienced and dependent people. They are not able to care for themselves and are just beginning to learn how to manage on their own. This is exemplified when Rocío Rodríguez worries about the volunteers’ diet:

Sometimes we notice that volunteers eat nothing but sandwiches every day. Then we say, here is lettuce and tomato, make yourself a salad. But [...] they have no experience making salads. (Rocío Rodríguez, project director)

Without the hosts, the volunteers seem helpless. This does not only apply to their physical but also their mental wellbeing. Especially around Christmas, hosts are worried about how volunteers will cope with being far from home:

[...] it is a difficult situation. We always have a year to explain the differences: [...] [at Christmas] there are no gifts, in many houses it isn’t even celebrated, [...] it is not a special day. That way, they are prepared when Christmas time comes so that it doesn’t come to them as a shock. (Carmen Andrade, director of host organisation)

Volunteers also have an undisciplined side, especially when it comes to working:

We, obviously, explain it to them – because sometimes they tend to get confused and think that they came to be tourists. But no, it’s different. You can go sightseeing, take advantage of being here, yes, but you know that your main

2 All direct quotes have been translated from Spanish and German into English by the author.

3 All names have been changed to ensure the participants’ privacy.

responsibility is taking care of the students, right? (Emilio Salazar, project director)

Volunteers are described like teenagers who revolt against the rules of the host organisations and the host families. They want to go out or travel while the hosts want them to stay at home and concentrate on work:

They feel that we are getting in the way of their independence because we are always visiting, asking how they are, asking the family, asking the coordinator [...] everyone is used to living much more independently then, that is what always bothers them a lot, right? [...] „But I do not understand, if I already live alone in Germany! [...] Why do I have to ask for permission? Why do I have to...?“ (Marta Vera, volunteer coordinator)

Just like rebellious teenagers become adults one day, the volunteers are also described as growing up during their service:

...when you look at them when they arrive and you look at them when they leave, you say, Wow, how cool! [Laughs] How cool, [...] you see how they have grown as people. (Marta Vera, volunteer coordinator)

4.2 Supporting and disciplining

As parents would do for their children, the hosts portray their tasks as supporting the volunteers and caring for them, but they also discipline them, make them obey the rules and show them how things are supposed to be done. Volunteer coordinator Ana García highlights the comprehensive support: “In case of an emergency, anything, they can always call me, at any time. Day or night.” But it comes at a price for the volunteers:

They are always monitored and sometimes they think it’s control but well, little by little they also realize that [...] they did not come on a paid vacation by the government, they came to do a volunteer programme and they have to comply with the requirements, with the rules, and for some it is hard, right? (Marta Vera, volunteer coordinator)

Some even make them sign a code of conduct including rules, such as “you have to shower every day” or “take care of your personal hygiene” (Rosa Morales, director of host organisation). Apart from caring for and disciplining the volunteers, the hosts also have the aspiration to educate them, not only when it comes to hygiene, but also regarding stereotypes of North-South relations:

Sometimes there are people who [...] choose a country that looks as if there was the greatest amount of poverty in the world [...] as a stereotype that I’m going to save them because those poor people have no one to do anything for them.

So, one of the most important parts of the programme is to create awareness among the young people that this thing does not exist. (Carmen Andrade, director of host organisation)

By conceptualising the relationship between volunteers and hosts as one of parental care, there are elements of reproduction of colonial relationships, but also elements of transformation. While the individuals in the South are still those responsible for (largely unpaid) care work, they also have the power to define what is right and what is wrong and to guide the volunteers' behaviour. This is a reversal of the postcolonial hierarchies in traditional development relationships where people in the South are often conceptualised as children who have to be educated by the development experts from the North.

4.3 Volunteers' expectations and disappointments

The volunteers' expectations overlap with the partners' perspective: volunteers express a desire to be cared for and supported. When they feel this is the case, the relationship is depicted positively:

I immediately felt totally welcome because the people who did this [introductory event] with us were very nice [...]. Exactly, [volunteer coordinator] is also very nice, and supported us so much the whole time, so I felt really cushioned. (Jacky Albers, volunteer)

However, when volunteers feel that they did not receive the support and care they were expecting, some express rather hard judgements of the partners:

They are very, very false. So, my first impression was that they were super mega nice. I also talked to them, [director of host organisation] was very understanding, pretended she was really taking care of it, dealing with it, the problems I have with the project and stuff, but she never contacted me again. She did not even ask how it worked out, how it is, how it developed, how I feel, not a tiny bit. (Theresa Marquardt, volunteer)

The volunteers express desire to be seen and to be cared for. Consequently, when they feel that they are not recognised and valued as individuals and their needs are not met, they express disappointment. This either leads to a devaluation of the hosts, as seen in the quote above, or makes volunteers reflect on the situation, like Mia Hardenberg describing the relationship with her project colleagues:

I've been asked a lot, "has your friend already flown back?" – „No, she is just on vacation, she will also stay one year.“ They did not know how long we stayed. We were never really equals. [...] In the beginning, I greeted them, and they did not greet me back because they were not sure who I was. But that got better. I understand that, they have so many volunteers passing through that they

don't really have a complete idea of who everyone was, I guess. (Mia Hardenberg, volunteer)

While most volunteers have expressed some kind of disappointment, their rationalisations of this experience can be categorised in two contrasting versions: disappointment either leads to the reflexion of their own role and the system they are a part of, or it leads to a reinforcement of a consumer mentality. The latter reinforces the conceptualisation of the partners in the South as service providers, as Kontzi (2015: 145ff.) has criticised:

It would certainly make sense [...] that they [host organisations] visit every volunteer who works for them, no matter if they have already visited the project last year, that they see if the project makes sense [...] or [...] if you should take the project out of the programme. But they are also very, very lazy. Of course, that [seriously monitoring the projects, LF] is much more work. (Theresa Marquardt, volunteer)

5. Mediators for global citizens

5.1 The volunteers as experts and global citizens

While volunteers are conceptualised as inexperienced people who have to be educated, they are also granted the role of global citizens and experts. This contradiction is possible because the latter roles are not deducted from the individuals, but from their origin from the global North, which is conceptualised as more orderly, punctual and reliable:

Germany is different and Latin America ... that is, if I speak of Latin America, there is a very similar culture from Mexico down to central Chile. From Chile, from the centre towards the South, it is a bit different, another culture. Here, it is like that: tomorrow, tomorrow, just a moment, just a little bit more, [...] and that's the way it is. (Carlos Zambrano, project director)

These characteristics are transferred to the volunteers. Additionally, volunteers are described as global citizens who bring “the big world out there” to local places in Ecuador. Through their mere presence, they are expected to broaden the minds of the local population:

Thanks to the support of our volunteers, they [the pupils in small rural schools] imagine how it would be in Germany, in Europe, they start thinking that they don't want to end up working at a ranch. “I want to learn another language, I want to get out. I want to travel, I want to learn. I want to be an engineer or something like this.” (Ana García, volunteer coordinator)

This representation of volunteers is in line with Kontzi's (2015: 130ff., 214ff.) finding that Weltwärts positions its volunteers as global citizens and experts in contrast to the local population that must be educated by them, like in this account of the recommendations Carmen Andrade gives to volunteers who witness violence against children – a situation she presents as appearing frequently:

It is a reality that you cannot change, but you can be a mirror of a different reality, if you see that teachers or families hit children, you give them affection, give them love, because it is a different way of teaching, you are a mirror in which others can see, to look at a different way of doing things, that there is a different way of doing things that works better. (Carmen Andrade, director of host organisation)

5.2 Mediation between the volunteers and the environment

Hosts see themselves as mediators between the cosmopolitan volunteers, on the one hand, and the local population, on the other. They are the ones who define which project or family is appropriate for volunteers:

My job is to [...] sign new agreements with schools, to see if they can fulfil them, we ensure that the [host] families are able to receive the kids [the volunteers], that they may not have political, cultural, social or religious problems. (Ana García, volunteer coordinator)

They also claim a more cosmopolitan position for themselves as compared to the local population:

I think that years ago, when the president began to allocate foreigners in the communities, they were like „no, that's scary“, [they thought] the Germans were very bold, cold, that they had no heart [laughs], but the people in the communities already know that it is very different, [...] and the Germans are also very affectionate. (Carmen Andrade, director of host organisation)

Hosts have no fear of contact with foreigners and they are not the primary targets of the volunteers' cosmopolitan influence. Through their relationship with the volunteers, the hosts claim transnational capital that positions them on a superior level than the rest of the local population.

5.3 Volunteers' ambivalent role

Volunteers agree with the hosts' perspective regarding their roles: they express the desire to be confirmed in their importance and their cosmopolitanism (see Schwing 2011: 79ff. for similar findings). This produces an ambivalence given the fact that they have assistant positions in the projects. If their ambitions are confirmed and they are granted positions superior to their level of education, they tend to be content with the situation:

LF: Do you have the feeling [...] that you are doing something meaningful?

JA: Yes, absolutely because, I also talked to my boss about it and he actually said that we are very important as volunteers, for the foundation. That they depend on us, that we are like good, paid, full-time workers, that they need us, and without us, they cannot work. (Jenni Albers, volunteer)

However, when this is not appreciated, they express discontent:

The boss [...] is not able to say thank you, but that's something they're often not able to do here. So, all the work we do here, my organisation would do nothing without the volunteers, really nothing! So, they would really need to close all programs. That would not work. And it's still exploited a bit, I'd say, and „thank you“ is rarely said. [...] they take it for granted. (Liane Bülow, volunteer)

This quote already shows that the volunteers do expect some kind of appreciation for their work. If they feel that it is not valued, there are, again, two dominant rationalisations of the situation. Some insist on the importance of their work and the superiority of their knowledge, devaluating their colleagues if they do not appreciate them:

The teachers see that when I see a quarrel, I settle it in a different way. The children hardly react to it, but I force them to realize that they can handle things differently, that they should handle things differently, and that they have to handle things differently. I try to make them aware, and the others [project director and colleagues] see that too. They certainly do not try it out themselves, with the attitude they have. But at least they see it, that will do something. (Theresa Marquardt, volunteer)

This is often coupled with an alliance-building with those who do not have a position of power in relation to the volunteers. Theresa Marquardt, who is quoted above, expresses that she prefers the company of the cook and the janitor of her project over that of her boss and co-workers because, in contrast to the latter, they appreciate her company: “They are super interested, they keep asking me stuff, I also tell them some things about Germany or Europe every day”.

Yet, the disappointment of not being granted an expert status and not being appreciated can also lead to a reflection of the own position:

I was generally unsatisfied with my work situation. As well as with myself, inasmuch as I really tried, but then I have not really seen where I can develop, so to speak, where I can contribute personally, personal skills ... Although one can also criticize... Well, what are your personal skills? So, I've worked in catering, I have worked before, but I do not have any specific skills that I can contribute. (Nora Paludo, volunteer)

She goes on that being involved more could help her having a feeling of purpose, but she gives to consider:

There is, of course, the question regarding if you can make this request as a volunteer or not. Can I actually say, hey, I just arrived, but you have to include me in all the planning, you have to involve me in everything? Well, something you wouldn't necessarily have in a normal working environment, as an intern.
(Nora Paludo, volunteer)

Confronted with a situation in which she did not feel important and appreciated, Nora Paludo reflects on her situation as an untrained volunteer and sees limits in what the host project can reasonably offer her. Theresa Marquardt, on the other hand, interprets a similar situation differently: according to her portrayal, people at the project demonstrate a problematic attitude by not appreciating the volunteer's contributions and not adapting themselves to her methods. This contrast between a destructive and a self-reflexive tendency was also found by Schwinge (2011: 112ff.).

6. Conclusion

The analyses show the complexity of the relationship of volunteers and hosts. By conceptualising volunteers as immature and vulnerable, hosts assert their own role as those who discipline them and care for them. Just like in a parental relationship, this goes along with unpaid care work as well as power. While the former reproduces the colonial master-servant relationship criticised by Kontzi (2015), the latter breaks with it: instead of the actors from the global North, it is those from the Global South who tell the others what to do, reversing traditional development relationships. The powerful position of hosts is underscored in the relation to the local population: the hosts present themselves as the ones who have transnational capital and who can judge what is good and bad. They also have the material power of allocating volunteers to projects and families.

While this might transform the hosts' position, overcoming the role of mere servants of the volunteers, it could also be detrimental in the context of internal power structures in the host country (see e.g. Walsh 2010). Since this hierarchisation builds upon traditional development categories such as global/local and modern/backward (Ziai 2015: 29ff.), these discourses are reinforced rather than transformed. The local population is used as a projection screen for both hosts and volunteers. Both feel confirmed in their preferred roles, the hosts by distancing themselves from the local population and the volunteers by building (discursive) alliances with the local population and against the hosts.

The latter is also a consequence of the volunteers' expectation of being both supported and appreciated as experts and global citizens – something that clashes with their positions in the projects. Here, volunteers subscribe to two contradicting

discourses – one of reflection and one of devaluation: while some rethink their expectations and notice that they might have been unrealistic, others depreciate the hosts. While the former does open up space for transformation, the latter reinforces a master-servant relationship.

The practical consequences that follow from this research are something that has frequently been demanded before (e.g. Skoruppa 2018): host organisations and projects should not only have an equal role in determining the programmatic orientation of the programme, but their efforts should also be paid adequately. Their extensive efforts and decisive role in the operation of Weltwärts should also be visible in the programme's self-presentation.

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