Making it mutual: Appropriate and constructive engagement of short-term volunteering with local projects

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Abstract

Existing research on the value and impact of short-term volunteering (STV) and the quality of its delivery focuses largely on the volunteer perspective. Equally crucial is understanding the 'local' experience and developing a stronger framework for the definition and drivers of effectiveness. Through grassroots, non-government organisation (NGO) GraceWorks Myanmar (GWM), interviews were conducted with Myanmar-based community leaders, predominantly nationals, using a qualitative framework. This was supported by a survey of Australians who had participated in voluntourism-styled tours – a form of STV. This research looked at questions of perceived and real value, impact, experiences, preferences and learnings. Local leaders pointed to STV's definite value, with more emphasis on intangible benefits than may be expected from an industry that typically focuses on tangible contributions. However, they also noted challenges with STV such as 'hidden' local costs, resourcing burdens, cultural superiority and unaccountable giving. Visitors discussed the positive impacts on their worldview, understanding of development and ongoing engagement in development-related work. Locals and visitors suggested the real 'benefit' accrued more to visitors than locals, while still espousing its value. This brings into question both the accuracy of 'make a difference' claims by those promoting STV, and the outcomes-oriented emphasis of STV's critics. The research clearly points to the role of effective design, supported by clear purpose and culturally-sensitive delivery, to ensure appropriate and constructive engagement that offers mutual value for communities and volunteers. However, the small and localised extent of this research, the massive investment in STV globally, and the dearth of research into local experiences, highlight the need for more locally-focused research.

Introduction

Short-term volunteering (STV) needs critical examination into the value provided to local communities and volunteers, and what it means to engage appropriately and constructively. As the domain of 'doing good', volunteering is sensitive territory to challenge. This is compounded by the inherent diversity within the notion of volunteering. Even when limiting the focus to volunteering in developing countries, there are many factors – multiple stakeholders, motivations, expectations, country contexts, community realities, service delivery and so on. Nevertheless, STV demands interrogation within a sustainable development framework due to its size and influence. One study estimates 971 million people globally volunteer in some form each year, with an economic value of between US$621 billion (opportunity cost approach) and US$1.348 trillion (replacement cost approach) (Salamon, Sokolowski & Haddock 2011, p.236 & 238). In addition, millions of dollars go into facilitating volunteer activities. Aside from dollars is the sense of its inherent risks and rewards.

I will argue that the relationship model and design underpinning STV are the strongest influencers of whether engagement is appropriate and constructive, and whether it offers mutual value for communities and volunteers. I will base the discussion on localised research conducted between 2011 and 2012 on behalf of GraceWorks Myanmar (GWM) – a faith-based community development non-government organisation (NGO) that works exclusively between Myanmar and Australia. In many cases, the findings align with other STV research, though it does highlight the importance of context to a robust understanding of the little and big picture. I will then look at the three elements of relationships, design and delivery, showing that relationships provide the strategy, and design the lever, to ensure that delivery places the right emphasis on 'being' and 'doing'. The term 'local' is used as a catch-all term for the Myanmar side, contrasted with 'visitors' as the volunteer side, purely for ease of discussion. All people involved are inherently diverse – yet another reason for a discussion around STV having so many caveats.

About GWM

Founded in 2004, GWM partners with local organisations and community leaders in Myanmar to help them support communities in achieving improvement and sustainability in their quality of life, while building their capacity (GWM 2012, p.4). Its focus is on education, health, community wellbeing and livelihood initiatives. GWM's operations include a separate tour arm that connects visitors with GWM's development work. It purposefully offers dual tourist and volunteer experiences led by local community members and Australians with long-term experience in Myanmar (GraceWorks Travel 2013). The majority of its STV work is anchored around orphanages and vocational-based projects, making the research findings significantly influenced by the nature of the projects and the services or support contributed (in contrast to, say, the technical nature of a medical mission). Importantly, Myanmar is a substantially under-researched country and its people are comparatively 'under-exposed' to visitors. Some insights are transferable to STV in other contexts. However, some of the findings, such as the worldview benefits discussed later, may be diluted in countries where communities have more exposure to other cultures.

Volunteering – a necessary good…not necessarily perfect

Volunteering is a major industry in its own right and all signs point to continued growth. This paper is not addressing the question of whether volunteering in general should exist. In fact, research from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC 2011, p.8 & 23-24) shows that its 13.1 million volunteers contributed almost US$6 billion in volunteer services in 2012, amplifying the paid workforce between 1 and 2,000 times. Considerable 'good' would be neglected were it not for volunteers. Furthermore, this paper is not designed to question whether STV should exist. The value of research into volunteering is in making STV as effective as possible rather than addressing the 'just send money' straw man. It also won't delve into the categorisation of volunteering on the basis of length or activities (see Callanan & Thomas 2005) or the range of sending organisations. Most broadly, volunteering is comprised of long-term volunteer placements that are more often skill-based, and STV, which typically involves a combination of skilled and unskilled support. While there is no agreement on the length that separates the two, STV is often

described as six months or less, though more commonly less than one month (Callanan & Thomas 2005, p.190, Martiniuk 2012).

For the purposes of this paper, volunteering is broadly treated under the definition applied by Volunteering Australia (2009), as 'an activity which takes place through not-for-profit organisations or projects and is undertaken: to be of benefit to the community and the volunteer; of the volunteer's own free will and without coercion; for no financial payment; and in designated volunteer positions only'. Here STV includes voluntourism, in part because locals interviewed did not distinguish between, for example, a half-day voluntourist within a group and a one-week or one-month solo volunteer. McGehee and Santos (in McGehee, 2012, p.84) define volunteer tourism as using 'discretionary time and income to travel out of the sphere of regular activity to assist others in need'. As the research findings will demonstrate, while a voluntourist may 'visit' local projects, even a few hours spent with one local project is seen to have value by locals and, in being purposeful, aligns with the broad definition of volunteering.

Why does any of this matter? Here is the classic scenario of concern – an STV group raises $25,000 to volunteer in an orphanage in Honduras, where the orphanage's annual budget is $45,000 and a local acknowledges that they 'could have done so much with that money' (van Engen 2000, p.20); or spends $30,000 on average to build homes that would have cost $2,000 if delivered locally (Ver Beek 2008, p.477). Arguably this is the origin of the 'just send money' idea (see Porter 2011). But then the picture blurs:

> A small local NGO that hosts paying volunteers who have relevant skills is likely to be having more development impact than the commercial organisation that buses in parties of school children to re-paint classroom walls every six weeks. However, the private company may also have a significant impact through direct economic inputs through employment, payments to communities and purchase of local goods and services. (Fee & Mdee 2010, p.227)

There is a strong lure to focusing on a transactional approach and an understandable frustration at the overstatement of the role that individual volunteering can play. Porter (2011) says, 'the world needs all the humanitarians it can get. I assure you: a two-week trip to Haiti will open your eyes. It might even change your life. But it likely won't change the life of a Haitian. A country can't be rebuilt two weeks at a time'. However, it comes down to context and, even in Haiti, Porter (2011) acknowledges there are contexts where volunteering is 'beneficial'. Taking it one step further, Palacios (2010, p.868) argues that 'the emphasis on the idea of effective help rather leads to misinterpret the role of the volunteer' – that intercultural understanding, not just the delivery of stuff, is central to STV.

Whether looking at STV for medical programs (see Green et al 2009, Martiniuk et al 2012), orphanages (see Reas 2013), missions (Livermore 2006b, Reese 2009, Schwartz 2003, Ver Beek 2008), sustainable tourism (Mowforth & Munt 1998), building projects (Ver Beek 2008, Fox 2010) or more generic build-a-well/teach-some-English style volunteering (Sherraden, Lough & McBride 2008, Simpson 2004, Simpson 2007, Ingram 2010, Morgan 2010), there are shared insights and learnings. This includes clear themes regarding actions that organisations and participants can take to make STV more effective (see Morgan 2010, Green et al 2009, Livermore 2006b), some of which will be discussed later.

There is a lot of research into STV from the volunteer side (see Palacios 2011, McGehee 2012, Hawkins, Verstege & Flood 2013). Some of this research challenges the motivations of volunteers (see Reas 2013, Sherraden, Lough & McBride 2008, Simpson 2004, Callanan & Thomas 2005), highlights the gaps between visitor perceptions of their role and impact compared to that of locals (see Livermore 2006b, Green et al 2009), and questions the value of the activities ultimately delivered (see Schwartz 2003, Simpson 2007). Strong detractors such as Simpson (in Ingram 2010, p.218) argue that 'volunteer tourism appears to ignore the root causes of poverty and inequality', while others question 'whether these Westerners possess the necessary capacities and motivations to produce effective help' (Palacios 2011). There is extensive coverage of the risks (see, for example, the risk of missions-based work in Slimbach 2000, p.4-5). Added to this are

debates around skilled versus unskilled support and the transparency of costly volunteer experiences (see Fox 2010). Then we have numerous conceptual frameworks for understanding the interrelationships, factors, impacts and drivers of volunteering (see Callanan & Thomas 2005, p.197-198, McBride 2008, p.397, McGehee 2012). However, there remains widespread agreement that research into local experiences, perceptions and benefits is seriously lacking (see Salamon, L, Sokolowski, S & Haddock 2011, Ver Beek 2008, p.490, Sin 2009, p.497).

The Myanmar factor

Myanmar represents one of today's most unique and dynamic development contexts. The pace of change is akin to watching decades of 'development' unfold in mere years and even months. Nevertheless, it remains a country facing significant challenges alongside unquestionable opportunities. It is still poorly understood, shrouded by the limited lens that often ill-informed media coverage has afforded. As Steinberg (2010, p.3) states of the biased views of modern times, 'we have been more concerned about political repression's impact on human rights than human rights issues arising from endemic poverty'. With a population estimated at between 48.7 million (UNDP 2013, p.196) and 53 million (Steinberg 2010, p.xxiv), Myanmar ranks 149th on the Human Development Index (UNDP 2013, p.143), measured as low human development. Despite gaps in data availability and reliability, and noted improvement in the HDI measure from 0.281 in 1980 to 0.498 in 2012 (UNDP 2013, p.150), life expectancy is 65.7 years (UNDP 2013, p.146). Public spending in crucial areas such as health and education (two areas of focus for GWM) is still severely lacking, measured at 0.2 per cent of GDP for health and 0.6 per cent for education (UNDP 2013, p.164). Out of 183 countries measured for health and 157 measured for education, Myanmar's public spending as the lowest in those areas. While domestic policy needs continued reshaping, and while there is evidence that volunteering can reduce government incentive to invest in social spending (see for example Green et all 2009), it would be difficult to suggest that volunteering does not have a meaningful role to play. Myanmar remains a highly strategic country economically, geographically and politically (Steinberg 2010, p.159-169) and its rapid economic growth means the gulf between the poor and rich is set to widen. It has also been closed for so long that the benefits of greater intercultural relationship building and other social advancements are potentially far-reaching. More needs to be done and, irrespective of its weaknesses, STV is one mode of 'delivery' – once we understand what STV really means.

Research method

From the local side, through GWM's networks, in-depth, semi-structured, in-person interviews were conducted in Myanmar in 2011 with 10 leaders of local projects – primarily orphanages, vocational and training-based organisations. Additional short, semi-structured interviews were carried out with a further two people as well as a focus group with 17 houseparents (leaders of orphanages within an orphanage network that met on a weekly basis for training and support). Interview questions focused on accounts of past visits and experiences, costs to locals, potential negative impacts or issues, benefits, and preferences, and recommendations for the design and management of future STV. Due to the continued sensitivities in the country, all names have been kept confidential.

The qualitative research was supported by an in-depth, online survey conducted in 2012 with 16 past participants of tours run through GWM's travel arm. This included qualitative and quantitative questions. The tours were based on an ethical tourism/voluntourism model, combining traditional sightseeing with volunteering at community projects linked to GWM's development work. Respondents had variously travelled to Myanmar between 2009 and 2011. Of 16 respondents, three had been on two or more trips. The research was designed to identify the expectations and perceptions of people's experiences, their views on the benefits and value for themselves and Myanmar locals, and recommendations for improving future tours and the STV efforts of GWM.

STV creates value for individuals and communities

The primary driver of STV is value. If no benefits accrue to community members, partners, volunteers or any other stakeholders, its purpose is questionable. The findings of this research clearly show there is modest value for locals and volunteers alike.

Intangible value spans emotional and intellectual benefits. While intellectual benefits were noted as being the most substantial, the emotional benefits were the immediate, top-of-mind impact of almost all interviewed. Visitors' presence brought joy to the community members they interacted with. Their participation sent a message of care, love, kindness and concern and many locals spoke of their deep gratitude. A number commented on the positive impact visitors had on challenging the view of some locals that 'the poor' were not worth spending time with. Through the focus group, houseparents said they were 'amazed guests spend their own money' to visit them. One said that a 'great' benefit for orphan children was in knowing 'we are not alone in the world…people love us' (interviewee 8). Having mainly come from areas where revenge, hatred and murder were common, one said, 'when they [orphans] see love, their lives change' (interviewee 8). Most interviewed reflected on the confidence-building benefits, particularly for children – 'they may forget the foreigner but the impact that foreigner had on building their self-esteem…can have a long-term impact' (interviewee 1). One described children as 'feeling special, feeling acceptance and love and confidence' (interviewee 4). Positive impacts on the dynamics between children were noted by a few. 'Some are always playing games but some are silent and when you come the silent ones come out…they are happy. It builds their emotions and intellect' (interviewee 10). With most sharing the Christian faith, some reflected on the positive impact of children seeing 'people from other countries worshiping the same God' (interviewee 5) and lifting their 'vision…higher than before' (interviewee 9). One contrasted the intangible with the tangible – 'people coming is more important than just sending money. Of course we need many things, but the people is what we need the most. When they come, they can feel God's love' (interviewee 9).

For adults, the affirmation that volunteers often gave locals built confidence in their own capacity:
> We already feel intimidation that we are not doing things the best way…Most of the time I find foreigners, when they come, they are always very positive to local teachers, so when they give affirmation – "wow you guys did a good job, you are very good in doing this" – …the local people really feel "I'm affirmed by this person, a person I don't know". (interviewee 4)

Awareness of the impact of affirmation and, at a deeper level, the role of power in the local-visitor dynamic is critical. Some research shows that volunteers can undermine the professional confidence of locals and reinforce the 'white skinned' foreigner as superior (see Green et al 2009), making sensitivity and cultural intelligence (see Livermore 2006b) vital. However, these positives are undeniable. Beyond those immediately involved, STV was perceived by one to be a positive witness to the broader community of a local project. And, while extensive comments were made about restrictions created by local authorities, one reflected that 'the area authorities…respect us' based on the involvement of STV with their project (interviewee 10). Zahra and McGehee's (2012, p.37) research discussed the role of STV in encouraging an 'increased sense of pride in their [locals'] identity and their culture'.

The primary intellectual benefit of STV was its role in expanding the worldview of locals – particularly of children in the case of orphanages and of villagers in the case of remote communities. 'We have been closed to other nations for many many years…so, when you come to us, it builds their perspective and worldview' (interviewee 10). For children in orphanages, this included expanding their knowledge of various careers and jobs, often because of the range of professions represented in diverse STV groups. One said volunteers provided 'a great copy for them…otherwise they stay in the compound, they go to the government school, so their community is only around there…This is a chance to open their eyes' (interviewee 6). Exposure to volunteers gave children more confidence in talking with foreigners and learning from different cultures – a benefit valued by their houseparents: 'children have to get knowledge from different people and different learning…not only on school lessons' (interviewee 6). In this way, STV helped spread the

idea of diversity. The theme of volunteers 'sharing from their experience' (interviewee 6) was strongly held.

The relationships built further influenced locals' worldview and understanding. In addition to sharing skills and knowledge, it was seen to provide a more realistic understanding of the lifestyles of visitors. One said, 'there's a human face to the money so the locals realise…that these are people who have life struggles and concerns' (interviewee 1). Another, who had the most experience in receiving STV support, said that locals, 'realise these [visiting] people didn't come because they have a lot of money to throw away, but they came here with a purpose…In my view, you might come for one day or one week, but when you get to know the students, they realise these people have life values…Sometimes people see foreigners the way they see them in the movies, and all these things can really change them' (interviewee 4). Research into experiences in Honduras also showed that locals saw value in STV, particularly in terms of relationship building (ie in the context of missions-based volunteering) (Ver Beek 2008, p.478-479). As Palacios (2010, p.872) argues, 'the intercultural relationships born out of these micro-scenarios have a significant value'. Sherraden, Lough and McBride (2008, p.414) see this notion of relationship building as an alternative benefit or contribution to 'traditional development' focused on providing technical assistance.

Skill sharing and transference was another pivotal point of value creation. For adults, building the skill-base of local leaders in areas such as teaching techniques, alongside the sharing of new ideas, were significant advantages. For example, in Myanmar, play has largely not been understood as a valid part of pedagogy. School teachers have reflected that they have low-level understanding of the pedagogy of play and parents largely emphasise the importance of more 'traditional' subjects such as maths. Volunteers without teaching backgrounds bring new ideas for leading games and involving play in teaching, due to their own experiences, and early childhood volunteers in particular provide deeper practical training for houseparents and teachers. Dual benefits mentioned in the focus group were happier environments for children and, again, greater confidence for leaders in their teaching capacities. Beyond the orphanage environment, or even teaching environment, was the positive impact of sharing development ideas from around the world:

> I gain a lot of information from them [visitors]. There are a lot of hidden things I don't see myself. So when they come I see these things…Because I see this poverty every day, my eye is numb to it, my feeling is numb to it. Everything is "that's a poor guy" and that's it. But someone comes from outside and looks not just "oh there's a poor guy" but "what can we do?" They give me information and ideas. I find people can see if they aren't living here – the outsider can see much better. (interviewee 4)

Despite interviewees being focused on orphanages and training/vocational centres, it is reasonable to assume that interacting with new people in any context can include the sharing of new ideas for mutual value. In all, locals elevated the benefits of social, cultural and human capital development over material capital (for a discussion of community capital see Zahra & McGehee 2012, p.26).

STV promoters typically emphasise tangible benefits, from financial to physical support, unless structured as a capacity-building program such as Australian Volunteers International (also more frequently 'long-term' placements). Tangible benefits were certainly raised by those interviewed…seen as genuine sources of relief and even survival. This spanned direct financial donations, rent and salary support, funds for food or education fees, and supplies such as rice, books, clothes, toys and equipment. Not surprisingly, tangible support is commonly reported in research from other countries (see Green et al 2009). In one case, where volunteers had purchased new towels for an orphanage, the houseparent said, 'the children didn't expose their towels because they looked shameful…the children all want to shower now because of their new towels' (focus group). Simple acts sometimes carried deeper meaning. One leader reflected, 'if we don't see you, how can we tell you our needs?' (interviewee 10). Some of those interviewed acknowledged it simply as 'free help' (interviewee 5), using volunteers for activities they could not afford or find time to do themselves. For others, it provided their overworked staff with a break –

'the children can relax, and for me also I can relax because you control the children and I can sit!' (interviewee 7). For one orphanage, nine staff members were responsible for the care of approximately 300 children. For them, volunteers allowed more time for English classes, computer skills training or basic tuition (focus group). Other research has found similar feedback from local community members regarding medical missions (see Martiniuk et al 2012, p4). One found that 'two out of the four health promoters working in rural, poverty-stricken areas described the free care provided by short-term medical volunteers as one of the greatest benefits to their patients' (Green et all 2009). This underscores the potential value of tangible support through STV.

The impact of STV in strengthening volunteers' understanding of development was seen to have a positive flow on effect by way of improving the accountability of donations. Purely sending money, as one discussed, 'creates dependency and becomes a welfare thing' with potential for that money to end up 'in the wrong hands' or even in the support of organised crime because 'there's no monitoring of where it goes' (interviewee 1). Whether building volunteers' understanding of a specific project or of the general challenges communities face in Myanmar, locals saw volunteering as linked with likely increases in future donations – 'they are donating to something they understand and it's real to them' (interviewee 1). When asked if it would be preferable for STV participants to send money instead, one said, 'to come is more effective because they can see our needs and how we live' (interviewee 9). In this way, STV could convert a short-term experience into a long-term relationship and thus encourage future involvement – donations and volunteering – and in rarer cases encourage someone to consider a long-term commitment to development work. STV was also seen to pave the way for future opportunities and expanded networks (or bridging ties) – 'you can bring the message of their [locals] need to the people [back home]' (interviewee 2). In addition to advocacy, it was seen to encourage future volunteers – 'sometimes short-term visitors, they come here and they see what we do and they try to open the way' (interviewee 8). Morgan's (2010) research supports this notion of voluntourism as helping to give host organisations a 'voice'. Certainly in the specific context of Myanmar, supported by research findings from other community contexts, STV can do, and is doing, good, contrary to the universal 'no!' offered by Simpson (2007).

…but the scale has to be grounded in reality

STV was never called into question in total and all those interviewed reflected on the importance of first-hand experiences for the benefit of locals. However, those most exposed to STV acknowledged that it was more about the volunteers:

> I always see short-term as my investment. And they might not realise that…If short-term people come, because of the preparation from our side and from the money they spend and all the things they are doing, it's not really long-lasting impact to the people…so when you come to work with me…for two weeks or one hour, I try to invest in you something which you might not know that will impact your life and my life as well. So one question people ask is, instead of people coming, why don't we just give the money…just for one week you spend thousands or hundreds of dollars…I say no, I want you to come, because when you come on your own, you learn from that experience…at the end of the day I'm investing in these people and a part of their lives. (interviewee 4)

Another said, 'the benefit for locals is very minor…it's more for the team as it builds relationships for the future…Don't expect that you will contribute anything here…you will learn a lot' (interviewee 11). This was echoed with, 'think of it as for the traveller and their potential life changes, not as a benefit for the locals' (interviewee 12). Keesbury (in Hawkins, Verstege & Flood 2013, p.22) shares the same conclusion that STV benefits volunteers more, and Hawkins, Verstege and Flood (2013, p.19) find, for example, there is not much evidence that volunteering supports capacity building. Importantly, the survey of GWM volunteers showed they shared the same view, with 82 per cent suggesting they benefited more than locals – arguably balanced self and environmental perception. This finding is supported by other research (see Green et al 2009, Livermore 2006a). (There is contrary research discussing the capacity for some volunteers to over-estimate local benefits (see Livermore 2006b).)

Linked with this idea of STV being more for the volunteer is the question of the length or sustainability of value. One of the locals interviewed, who grew up in an orphanage and became one of its key leaders, said of an STV team:

> It was one day of work. Nothing big came out. They came to do what they came to do. And those who can speak English or who can understand Burmese could make connections… but for younger children they play and sometimes when they came to paint they had no games, so for little children it's very boring…but it has some advantages…good points and bad points always. For example, many varieties of life ages came. (interviewee 7)

This perspective was common, acknowledging that the specific mix of volunteers, their backgrounds and experience, preparation, and the focus of their time all influenced how the visit was received by local projects and by individuals or sub-groups within that context. For example, children and young adults would often sing or dance for visiting teams to the above orphanage, even though the young adults would rather do something else (interviewee 7). MacCannell (in Mowforth & Munt 1998, p.58) talks about the issues with this 'staged authenticity' and what is really being communicated through the exchange between local and visitor. In some cases, local projects were treated more as 'drop by' experiences, with some locals saying 'we don't know who will come or when' thus disrupting routine and preventing any meaningful planning and preparation (focus group). Again the strength of the relationship with the sending organisation influenced the extent to which this happened.

This research also revealed a range of practical issues caused by STV for local partners. The most prominent was its resource-intensive nature. While respondents wanted to show their gratitude for past volunteers, and most were quick to say there were no negative impacts from visits, they would eventually cite costs that they, or peers, had to cover. These ranged from taxis and transportation for visitors to food and other hospitality expenses. Where long-term relationships with facilitating organisations existed, such as those with GWM, those costs were generally built into STV cost structures, funded by the volunteers. However, one-off volunteer scenarios, or instances where the relationship between a local project and facilitating organisation was weaker, often resulted in 'hidden' costs for locals – compounded by their feedback that, culturally, most locals would not discuss those costs with their visitors:

> When you visit them, you may not request it, but they want to treat you with their best. They killed a pig and a chicken…the best food they can make, the many varieties they can make. That is a village way and according to the village culture…it may have a cost…it is not really a big burden but everybody has to share a little bit. (interviewee 2)

Less 'powerful' locals were more vulnerable to the downside of volunteer support. In same cases it was due to assumptions – eg that locals use their own vehicles to meet people when many actually use taxis at their own expense. One said:

> …sometimes it's good to ask [the local person with you], even though local people are very shy to say. They go with you for the whole day and, after at your hotel, they say, "bye bye, see you tomorrow", and they are saying [to themselves], "Lord help me". Sometimes it happens. (interviewee 4)

Similar findings from other countries suggest this is not unique to Myanmar, such as families buying special expensive food items to thank volunteers (Zahra & McGehee 2013, p.35-36).

Direct costs were compounded by the time cost to support volunteers. Comments were made about the length of volunteer stays and the impact on local counterparts getting their own work done. Scenarios reflected a lack of awareness by volunteers that it was possible to overstay their welcome – where locals had to continually facilitate opportunities for the volunteers to contribute. 'Last year I had people with me for six months and it was so difficult to care for them because we needed to take them everyday because they want to volunteer. One month is fine' (interviewee 3). While on the surface this could be attributed to the fairly unsophisticated NGO and volunteer infrastructure that a country such as Myanmar may be assumed to have, accounts from countries well-acquainted with volunteering reveal similar resource-sapping challenges. Green et al (2009) found the same feedback from locals in Guatemala, with one describing himself as 'half project

coordinator and half tour guide' (see also van Engen 2000). It is a role that Slimbach (2000, p.2) describes for locals as 'culture brokers' – people who manage this negotiated space between what volunteers want and what they do, see and experience.

Cultural awareness is another central influencer of the quality of outcomes, relationships, and after-effects. This is relevant for any country context. However, given the focus on Myanmar, there is perhaps an additional level of imperative for STV to work within the 'fragile state' context above all other factors (OECD 2011, p.23). Ware (2012, p.42-49) argues for critical understanding of the role that specific contexts play. In Myanmar, local authorities in many regions still restrict the involvement of foreigners and may interpret their presence as being connected with money – 'most visitors don't understand culture and policy…like being able to report ahead…then when groups leave, local authorities think we have all of these resources' (focus group). For areas with rules around the entry of foreigners, local projects have to prepare for visits, including providing passport copies and fees to local authorities. When there was no warning by visitors, local leaders would face behind-the-scenes challenges. When visitors had no understanding of these cost implications, they would leave yet another expense behind. Again, in the case of GWM visits, this was built into STV costs to ensure local projects were not out-of-pocket. Locals cited instances where foreigners could even negatively influence community relationships due to perceived favouritism and provision. Other basic actions, such as the use of cameras, can further cause difficulties in more sensitive regimes:

> We don't want problems with our local authority and government – we don't want media. If there is a problem the main impact is to the children…If they keep it for themselves it's not a problem but if they use it for their business or a report to the media, we don't want this – this is toxic for us. [After one group filmed and released a DVD back home] Mainly we aren't angry with them, they want to help us. They want to announce and advertise and help but from our side we cannot do it like that. (interviewee 6)

Understanding cultural realities is again essential. As one said, 'if people do the wrong thing we just stay quiet and pray…Myanmar culture and overseas culture are very different. Myanmar people when they feel upset they keep it in their heart' (interviewee 5). While very distinct to these scenarios, similar issues relating to cultural ignorance have been reported of medical missions. 'Of likely concern is the quality and efficacy of the medical care provided by foreign doctors who can be unfamiliar with local health needs, local culture and the strengths and limitations of the healthcare system in which they must leave their patients for follow up care' (Martiniuk et al 2012, p.5). Similar findings suggest that in those instances STV 'efforts will be misguided' by not 'integrating with local medical systems' and even having a lower incentive for quality (Green et all 2009).

Next to cultural sensitivity is the, perhaps, deeper challenge of cultural superiority. This was not a significant issue with the respondents in this research but was raised as a note of caution by those more experienced with STV. One expat now living in Myanmar described the potential damage: 'there's a cultural superiority…then the locals submit to that, so there's an "us and them". They have these titles of superiority for us and that can sometimes feed your ego' (interviewee 1). The ability to recognise and respect the social structures of a culture is equally crucial. While not expecting volunteers to bend to 'subversive' cultural dynamics, such as the inequitable treatment of women, fundamental cultural respect was highlighted. 'I've seen North American women coming in and bossing around these older men who have lived through things you couldn't even imagine and it's very disrespectful' (interviewee 1). This caution of cultural superiority is supported by other research (see Schwartz 2003, p30). In the case of short-term medical volunteers, Green et al (2009) suggest they 'often bring with them, albeit unconsciously, attitudes that foster dependence and lack respect for local practitioners and local knowledge and practices related to health'. Schwartz (2003, p.28), details an account of volunteering by Americans and Canadians alongside locals in Zimbabwe, with locals saying that 'unfortunately, while they were here, they thought they were the only ones who knew how to build buildings'. Livermore (2006b, p.99) describes the simplistic assumptions that can be made, with American youth interpreting local responses as elevating them to rock star status when in fact the local youth were egging them on as a joke, very familiar with life in a cosmopolitan city in South America.

Another point raised was the problem of volunteers wanting to deliver work driven by their interests, and/or their views of local needs, rather than delivering support based on locally determined needs and priorities:

> Another danger is when people come here with a project and they impose it on the locals. Recently, reading a proposal from a company in Vancouver, they were developing a solar battery…and they are developing and marketing it for developing countries, tying it into micro loans. The problem is the battery and the technology would be about $5,000 and would only produce about four hours of electricity. So the assumption in Vancouver is, everyone needs electricity, so you take this $5,000 unit to the village where they haven't seen electricity ever and you say this will cost you 10 years' labour, because the average income is $1 a day, so we're going to microloan it to you for $5,000 and you have to now pay it back and make some sort of profit from this electricity that you have no use for because when the sun goes down you go to bed. (interviewee 1)

> One thing I find that creates tension between the visitors and the locals is when they want to push too much what they want to do from the visitors' side. For example, some people said we are coming to help to repair the road, do community work, it looks very good, but in Myanmar it takes a lot of red tape to go through and it might not work. Okay you want to come and help build the orphanage because we donated the money and we want to give physical help, and it creates a lot of red tape for the local people. So if they are not sure, they should do something else, not push what they want to do. (interviewee 4)

This challenge widens when considering the risk of duplication or replacement of work. While Morgan's (2010) research shows increased local employment as one of the potential benefits of voluntourism, Green et al (2009) discuss the risk to local livelihoods through the duplication of services, with the advantage going to free volunteer services. Discussing medical missions to Guatemala, Green et al (2009) say, 'patients get used to the free care and end up waiting for the next group to arrive to give them free care rather than seeking out ways in which they can help themselves. What will happen when all the NGOs leave? The people won't know how to go about finding a way to get care'. Similarly, Simpson (2007) says, 'I visited one school in Malawi where the head teacher said she took Western volunteers because they were cheaper than paying local staff'. The findings from Myanmar reinforced this need to be conscious of the impact of engagement. Even inconsistency can have a negative flow on effect – with one local saying of an orphanage, 'the children were sad because no one had visited them in six months' (interviewee 3). Speaking to potential volunteers, Porter's (2011) report on Haiti says, 'just don't go down there to volunteer for two weeks…your good intentions might have the opposite effect: you would be paying to do a job a Haitian is literally starving for, and the normally neglected child you are holding for a few days in a run-down orphanage might be damaged from your affection'. Of short-term missions, van Engen (2000, p.22) says the inherent desire for short-term teams to 'solve problems quickly' can make Christians in developing countries feel 'incapable of doing things on their own'. Critical awareness of cause and effect realities is central to this notion of appropriate and constructive engagement. As Schwartz (2003, p.30) says, 'our challenge is to find a way to help that does not leave others with the impression they are too weak, too helpless and too uninformed to help themselves'.

Another key point of potential contention was around the flow of donations from visitors to local projects and local people. Challenges raised in the research included uncontrolled giving, where volunteers would hand over money to a local leader without checking with the local partner overseeing their stay. This is matched by other experiences. Reese (2009) talks about the 'sense of guilt for having so much wealth' that can lead to 'rash decisions that produce dependency'. In turn it encourages co-dependency – ie locals get what they ask for and visitors get a 'good feeling from helping people in need', creating situations where 'recipients even learn to place donors on a pedestal in return for favours granted' (Reese 2009). In Myanmar, volunteers would visit a project and return home to raise funds based on their view of needs, rather than engaging with the local partner to understand the broader context:

They don't ask any questions. After visiting, they are so excited about the children and they don't ask questions and they raise the funds…After visiting any orphanage if they want to raise support, we want to talk first and discuss first. It's good if we know the orphanage and their long-term vision. (interviewee 3)

While potentially there is an aspect of control within the local hierarchy, some of this was simply to combat corruption – a known issue with some local projects – and avoid giving without monitoring. Reese (2009) says, 'eager to solve global problems with American money and technology, they [visitors] plunge in with solutions before they understand the local situations and forge financial relationships with people they scarcely know'.

In other cases, funds were provided to individuals, typically translators and local representatives who were more involved with STV groups than their peers, causing jealousy and inequity. One local leader said, 'I ask people, if they want to give money or gifts, it's better to go through an organisation's leaders, so it's not giving to that person, so it can be shared' (interviewee 4). This lack of accountability of visiting donors in Myanmar, particularly at the interpersonal, grassroots level, has caused a number of known challenges. In some cases, it has resulted in a form of corruption whereby a local project has been funded two and three times over by well-meaning donors, who have no connection to a network that provides accountability – with funds kept and used for everything from other community projects to the purchase of personal cars. 'It's very difficult to manage – we need to work together' (interviewee 3). This cycle of 'easy' money is seen over and again in Myanmar, though not unique to that nation (for similar accounts in Zimbabwe see also Reese 2009). It has also resulted in what locals describe as fundraising wastage, with money provided to local projects governed poorly in finances, strategy and/or day-to-day operations.

Naïve interactions were also cited, where the genuine interest shown by a visitor toward someone's story or situation is interpreted as a promise of financial support:

Don't give them [locals] false hope…most of my contacts are from church…so for example you come and you say, "what can I pray for you brother". And I say, "please pray for me for my children's school fees and my motorcycle, car, house". All these prayer requests will come. And then you will say…I will pray for you. That is a genuine conversation from your side…If God enables me to help you I will but at the moment I don't have money to help you. That's you being sincere. They are also sincere in what they need, but they are thinking, a foreigner is going to pray, God must answer. So, if I go with you to an orphanage and you tell the orphanage leader, "I will pray for you", after you leave, the orphanage leader will come to me and say, did God answer her prayer yet?...what they hear is "I will pray for you" means "I will pay for you". (interviewee 4)

Similarly, where visits were less defined and more open-ended, there was greater scope for misunderstanding and even disappointment. One interviewee had taken a team to visit a remote village, saying 'they do not really have expectations' (in terms of future support). While a sincere comment, they then acknowledged:

They are concerned for the future education of their children, but the school is very ruined and they don't know what to do. By themselves they feel that they are very much in a helpless situation…with the foreigner, you visit now, and whether you can help them or not it creates some kind of hope for them. (interviewee 2)

In this case there were two realities in play – the genuine social exchange of welcoming visitors plus a hope for follow up support. Awareness of the two realities, in the least, is essential so that a visit does not leave locals wondering what went wrong. Zahra and McGehee (2013, p.35) describe circumstances like this, where future support is either directly offered or built up as an expectation as 'broken bridges', when even simple contact is not maintained.

Well-managed STV can have modest but real value, but it has to be couched in a strong understanding of culture – a recognition that fly in-fly out experiences leave behind people who continue with their lives. 'You can undo six months of hard work in one well-meaning trip by going

backwards in terms of creating dependency, giving funds without understanding the context…rather than true partnership' (interviewee 12, see also Schwartz 2003, p28).

There is also value in STV for volunteers

This volunteer research engaged tour participants who had actively sought out Myanmar as a destination and voluntourism as the style of travel. As with any life context, their existing worldviews played a role in the nature of their expectations and engagement with local projects. For example, one described the style as 'low impact' on local community members as opposed to it being 'a busload of rich tourists who were out to 'take' from the locals' (survey findings). With all having prior interaction with GWM, there was a familiarity established with the projects and even some local leaders prior to landing in the country.

The dual opportunity to see and experience the country, and to contribute 'in a small way', was the overriding theme of participants' hopes for their trip. People were generally looking for a cultural experience including a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities available to people in Myanmar and in developing countries more broadly. For some who were financial supporters of GWM, it was an opportunity to see the work firsthand and to see how funds raised in Australia were applied. Others had fairly specific goals, such as gaining a better understanding of the educational systems and opportunities in the country, learning more about the culture of Burmese refugees they worked with back in Australia, visiting specific projects, learning new skills, having more direction in their own lives, and sharing the experience with family and friends. People had humble and moderate expectations of their potential contribution. Most hoped to contribute meaningfully in any way they could, including using their own practical and professional skills for the benefit of local communities. Hoped for contributions spanned emotional support, skills transfer and material support. Some had specific expertise in areas such as early childhood training, disability support and teaching, while others felt they had little to offer prior to going on the trip. In some cases, people were seeking to gain a better understanding of how they could contribute more deeply through a second/future visit.

These moderate and considered expectations of their volunteer contributions contrast with a lot of the focus of STV critique – the 'make a difference' claim. As an example, one sending organisation with a recognised robust, sustainable, monitored and participatory approach to STV (see Callanan & Thomas 2005, p.194) nevertheless promotes volunteering opportunities saying:

> A volunteer trip abroad with Cross-Cultural Solutions will change you. Change the way you see other cultures. Maybe even change how you live your life. All while you change the lives of others for the better. Ultimately we're changing the way volunteering is done, making it a safe, exciting adventure of a lifetime. (Cross-Cultural Solutions 2013)

Cross-Cultural Solutions has its peers – other sending organisations that follow widely accepted rules of engagement and yet promote dramatic change. There are countless other entities that do not have a quality framework and also promise that volunteering offers significant value to the poorest of the poor. From the volunteer side, Reas' (2013, p.124) talks about the dark side of people's 'rescue fantasies' and Livermore (2006a, p.4) debunks the legitimacy of much of the 'radical, personal transformation' claimed by returned volunteers. Again, yes, this space is contentious. What is essential to acknowledge is that, in the case of GWM's volunteers, people held modest expectations of their contributions. They were not expecting to change the world or transform anything.

Reflections of personal benefits on their return to their home focused on the eye-opening nature of the trip, including giving them an increased appreciation for their own lives and opportunities back in Australia. A few commented on how overwhelming the need and poverty was. Some linked the experience to giving them more confidence in the integrity GWM's work. For some volunteers it created satisfaction from having contributed usefully (noting again that no respondent suggested their contribution was significant) and for others it provided a new desire to return and/or support people in the future. However, the most common benefit related to the knowledge and understanding gained specific to Myanmar and in general regarding the lives of people who face

poverty. One of the locals interviewed also noted the benefit of giving volunteers 'more understanding of their [local community members'] real situation' in part to share the message of need back home (interviewee 2). This feedback of the cultural understanding built through STV aligns with wider research. van Engen (2000, p.23) argues that 'money invested in learning about the causes of poverty in developing nations – and what can be done – is money well spent'. Sherraden et al (in Palacios 2011) talk about the importance of 'building of international understanding' – a view strongly shared by Sherraden, Lough and McBride (2008, p.414). Palacios (2011) takes the idea one step further, in the case of university student volunteers who report unmet expectations and frustrations:

> The unrealistic expectations seen in this university context suggest that volunteers share with volunteer tourism commentators the same bias regarding [International Volunteering and Service] IVS goals. Both, by prioritizing the goal of development aid, reinforce the disconnect between what is expected from a "volunteering" program and what actually happens during the volunteering practice; mutual intercultural learning is undermined while "help" continues to be the drive of volunteer tourism practice and theory.

Participants generally acknowledged that their direct contribution was not necessarily enough 'to create a lasting change' (survey results). However, a number reflected that they could see the way that GWM was working to support sustainable development and self-sufficiency in the long-term. In light of this, responses about benefits were linked as much to GWM's broader work as the specific tour in which they participated. Overall, the direct benefits that participants described on return closely aligned with their desired contribution. (While the survey was conducted in full on their return, all participants were involved in pre-departure briefings that captured their expectations, providing a point of reference for pre and post alignment). Interestingly, just as local respondents placed intangible support as equally significant to tangible support, STV tour participants also cited emotional support, encouragement and the passing on of professional knowledge as the primary benefits. Visitors and locals also shared the view that the volunteering experience may encourage future moral and material support.

The survey included a range of quantitative questions looking at impacts on the participants' lives. The overarching theme was the positive impact of STV on both people's understanding of development issues and on their intention to contribute to community and charity-related work in the future. The experience increased awareness of poverty among 56 per cent of those who travelled and an increased understanding of development among 87 per cent of participants. For 31 per cent, there was no impact on awareness, potentially due to the extent of prior knowledge of GWM's work and development in general (including returning volunteers). Irrespective of past knowledge, 94 per cent indicated that the tour provided a valuable learning experience. It is interesting to note that there was equal indication for and against the influence of the trip on future volunteering contributions. This aligns with research that shows actual volunteering and giving in real terms often not increasing as a result of volunteer experiences (Livermore 2006a, p.15, Ver Beek 2008, p.479-480). However, the trip increased future willingness to consider ethical tourism/voluntourism trips among 75 per cent of participants, and 56 per cent indicated that the trip influenced their decision to increase their donations to community-based work. It increased people's engagement with Myanmar back at home among 94 per cent of participants via paying more attention to news about Myanmar. (Increased engagement at home was noted by one of the local respondents, whether general awareness, advocacy, stronger cross-cultural relationships or volunteering (interviewee 1)). The majority (82 per cent) suggested they benefited more than locals. However, this may be linked to the view that short-term involvement could not create significant change but that, over time, the work of GWM could provide long-term value. Reflecting again on other research findings, 94 per cent indicated that the mutual exchange of ideas and experiences is an important role in and of itself.

Naturally factors such as the length of an STV program, the type of services contributed, preparation and training, expectations, motivations and a host of other realities would influence volunteer feedback. Even the above example from Palacios (2011) shows that volunteers can return with vastly different views to those of GWM's surveyed participants. The importance of this research is to temper sometimes wild generalisations regarding volunteers' expectations and

perceptions of making a difference, and to demonstrate that effective relationships, design and delivery influence appropriate and constructive engagement for the benefit of all parties.

A side word on ethnocentrism

While not the focus of this paper, it is important to acknowledge that the promises made, expectations set and images portrayed through STV experiences all play a role in reinforcing or challenging dominant hegemony and ideas of power, dependency, superiority and so on. The messages used, particularly by organisers, at all stages of an STV experience speak volumes of the sending organisation's values and worldview and, in turn, the attitudes and behaviours likely to be reinforced. There is ample evidence that there are STV organisations attuned to what is needed to break damaging practice. However, there is a long way to go.

The stereotype of the benevolent west 'saving' those incredibly poor people in the east comes through promotions that place the white person in a position of delivering salvation-like support to community members (see Mowforth & Munt 1998). Porter (2011) reports from her experience in Haiti that 'my Haitian translator Dimitri says this reinforces the slavery mentality – that anyone from the developed world who can afford to come to Haiti and is white has something to teach. Development and humanitarian NGOs frequently portray similar images (Reas 2013, p133) and so this is not unique to STV or even tourism in developing countries but rather the more pervasive issue of developed-developing, north-south, us-them discourses that play out on numerous stages. Brown and Hall (2008, p.845) argue:

> At bottom, however, it reduces development to individual acts of charity which seek to work round rather than transform the relationship of poor, rural societies to the natural world. The use of volunteers, who often have little knowledge or experience of the work they are undertaking (an attraction for the volunteers), also calls into question their effectiveness and raises the spectre of neo-colonialism in the tacit assumption that even ignorant Westerners can improve the lot of people in the South.

Reas (2013, p.121-122) critiques the unqualified use of orphans as a selling point for voluntourism in Cambodia:

> …however well intentioned, this particular form of vacationing objectifies poor Cambodian children as adorable innocents and commodifies their poorness into a marketable resource that an ever expanding volunteer tourist industry – as well as NGOs and local businesses – are successfully exploiting to satisfy the rescue fantasies of this particular group of holidaymakers.

Drawing on the 'innovative skills of a host of creative experts in the advertising industry' the 'poorness and charm of the Cambodian orphan' becomes part of a manufactured product (Reas 2013, p.131). From the volunteer side, the 'reward and gain' discourse in orphanage-oriented tourist marketing perpetuates damaging power ideas (Reas 2013, p.125) and some STV models are ultimately 'paternalistic' in the way they favour the wealthy who can accrue goodwill by affording their do-good adventure (Sherraden, Lough & McBride 2008, p.414). Delivered without cultural intelligence, short-term experiences are also known to create in some volunteers a damaging 'they're so happy' conclusion of the lives of the poor (Livermore 2006a, p.15). Simpson's (2004, p.690) assessment of gap year volunteering finds similar issues, calling for a 'pedagogy of social justice' to underpin gap year engagement (see also Sin 2009, p.497). From the local side, there are risks in the 'cyclical and demand-led' nature of tourism (Morgan 2010), linking volunteering to 'uneven development' (Simpson 2007). Mowforth and Munt (1998, p.67), including voluntourists among the new era of individual tourists, state that:

> individual representatives of the new middle classes (travellers, backpackers, and so on), are no less interventionist. The scale and scope of their activities may be qualitatively different from the power wielded by tour operators or large environmental organisations, but their culpability in the process of commodification is no less. For such tourists it is the supposed desire to experience 'indigenous cultures' – the Third World otherness – that is a major driving force of their travels and results in the search for 'off-the-beaten-track' or 'less visited areas'.

While arguably not the motivation of all volunteers, it is another factor that has to be considered.

Ethnocentrism can be further reinforced through on-the-ground experiences that fail to critically look at what is being communicated through interactions between volunteers and locals. For example, children in some orphanages in Myanmar will fan visitors, whether purely tourists or volunteers, as visitors are generally not used to the heat and humidity. Houseparents and NGO representatives are known to encourage this because of a view that the children enjoy doing it. And they might. However, whether or not they enjoy it, it is important to ask whether it merely reinforces damaging power relationships. Having personally experienced that situation, another of the volunteers described the moment as making her feel 'colonial' and uncomfortable. Slimbach (2000, p.2) cites the need for being conscious of the 'disparities of power and levels of stereotyping that would not exist amongst neighbours or peers' due to the 'staged' space in which interactions – whether niche tourism or volunteering – take place. Livermore (2006, p.15) argues:

> In the spirit of mutuality, short-term teams need to learn to give in ways that do not perpetuate the tired power structures of colonialism while also learning to receive from the plenty that exists in the communities they visit. A generous spirit is a worthy outcome from these kinds of activities. It simply needs to be held in tension with the de-humanizing impact that can result from charitable giving done without cultural intelligence.

Awareness of realities that exist even despite efforts to avoid these colonialist tendencies is equally vital. In the case of medical missions, 'the very real power and wealth differential between short-term medical groups and their host communities make trust, understanding, and true partnership difficult' (Green et al 2009). In short, intentions alone are insufficient to ensure appropriate and constructive engagement and attracting volunteers by any means or message is equally ineffective if holistic, sustainable development is in fact the motivation.

Appropriate and constructive engagement

Three broad stages influence appropriate and constructive engagement between STV and local projects and, in turn, the value created – relationships, design and delivery.

Relationships

Whether an NGO, commercial enterprise or individual, the STV sending organisation's purpose fundamentally drives its development worldview and, therefore, the nature of its relationships and interactions. It influences whether engagement with local organisations, projects and individuals is through a partnership-based relationship, with the potential for two-way, mutual benefit, or through a consumption-based relationship, with a more simplistic and short-term framework of give and take. Relationship structures are crucial because they determine later realities such as the level of local control and involvement in the design of volunteer experiences and how they are conducted. They dictate power dynamics and the extent to which volunteering is part of a broader sustainable development approach versus a dependency approach. Potentially the starkest contrast is the commercial-focused entity intent on attracting more volunteers versus the development-focused entity intent on impact (Morgan 2010). The nature of the relationship is the anchor to everything that follows.

Locals interviewed in Myanmar shared the view that, when there is a long-term relationship with a sending organisation, the cumulative value of STV offsets the realities that short-term support cannot truly make a difference in isolation. In essence, the relationship drives effectiveness. Comparing short with long-term volunteering, one said, 'both are good – the difference is the kind of relationship. Human beings turning up is where the relationship starts – where the heart starts. Sending money, it might be gone. Relationship is long-term' (interviewee 8). Another said, 'focus on one place and go again and again and again and you will learn more about the needs and learn new things you can do' (interviewee 3). This raises the challenge of mismatched objectives – in this case, the local desire for teams to revisit to grow with them and the visitors' reality that often STV is one-off for individuals. However, locals reflected that, even if volunteers were new each

time, repeat visits could support a long-term strategy that is connected to a sustainable development framework. Speaking of the relationship with GWM's CEO, one interviewee said 'it's no longer for the short-term, even though it's short days…he looks for the long-term (interviewee 8). That desire for relationship came through consistently:

> We learn from you when you come. We have to learn how to do everything – how to care for 40-50 children. If you don't see, how do we work together through the process? We want it to be a process, not one time…I can work for about 15-20 more years but this work will continue. If we don't work hand-in-hand how will we do this? This is building generations work. We are making a new generation for the nations. (interviewee 10)

Strong relationships were seen to create more scope for managing the frequency and flow of STV as well as encouraging benefits such as increased accountability and reduced issues such as abandonment (see also Webb 2008, Ver Beek 2008, p.494). The relationship then creates the foundation for effective design. One local leader said of the sending organisation, 'I want to know their heart and what they want to achieve' (interviewee 5). Another of the more established locals said, 'most of the teams now, before we do anything, we agree together' (interviewee 3). Fee and Mdee (2010, p.234) cite the example of short-term volunteers providing English language teaching with long-term consistency through the syllabus. One of the Myanmar locals described the same model as being highly effective in striking the right balance.

Wider research strongly points to the imperative of relationships. Green et al (2009) state that:

> …the importance of short-term medical volunteers coordinating their activities with groups that have a long-term presence in Guatemala was by far the most frequent recommendation made by our informants…Many Guatemalan informants described the educational opportunities for both sides when visiting teams work together with the Guatemalan providers.

This was contrasted with the issue where groups without that level of coordination 'frequently provide services that do not match the needs of the community' (Green et al 2009). Long-term relationships also serve to overcome the 'incremental' realities of voluntourism (Brown & Hall 2008, p.845). As Reese (2009) states, 'when long-term goals take precedence, this increases the vision and purpose of each trip, which now becomes part of a larger plan. Training becomes more directed'. This is where the link between relationship and design becomes strongly apparent.

Design

The design of STV experiences becomes the greatest area of risk and opportunity. First and most crucial is who is involved in the design and planning. Two-way, participatory design processes are clearly linked with stronger outcomes and greater benefits for intended beneficiaries. Giving beneficiaries and local organisations control over design and delivery is central to sustainable, context relevant development (Ware 2012, p.50). However, with participation now a development buzzword, the idea must be applied with a critical approach. Speaking of new tourism, such as voluntourism, Mowforth and Munt 1998, p.240 argue that 'by contrast, the only forms of local participation that are likely to break the existing patterns of power and unequal development are those which originate from within the local communities themselves'. When participation is being encouraged by those outside the community, other dynamics are at play. Myanmar, like any country, has its cultural mores that mean a process or discussion involving the right people may be far from genuine participation. One local said of making their preferences known, 'by ourselves we don't make requests like that…we don't want to give them a burden' (interviewee 6). Decades of oppression have resulted in a culture where speaking up and speaking out is rare. Furthermore, Ware (2012, p.53) challenges the idea by asking 'how well this participatory model sufficiently empowers participants in difficult contexts…to make development decisions that are counter to elite interests'. This could be said of operating on a national or regional stage with elites such as the military, or even at a more localised level such as the more powerful, English speaking local 'elites' whose voice is heard more strongly. So we have a principle – participation and ownership over the design of STV is essential – and we have a reality – participation is far from straightforward.

Nevertheless, if design is to be linked to development (Fee & Mdee 2010, p.230), then participation is vital. It leads to ownership, which is potentially the most powerful antidote to dependency – whether created by naïve donor behaviour or locals successfully gaining the next easy handout. Furthermore, participatory processes that are not tokenistic but rather sincere collaborations reduce the risk of local projects being constructed as cultural zoos…sites of 'can't buy this' experiences (see Mowforth and Munt's (1998, p.273) 'zooification'). Truly two-way design is more likely to work against the weakening of local support structures, such as medical missions that tightly lock into local structures (Maki in Martiniuk et al 2012, p.4) thereby delivering more relevant support without duplication or job-stealing. As Reese (2009) says 'do nothing for others that they can do for themselves'. Volunteers should not do work that locals can or should be doing, from painting classrooms to building infrastructure. In addition, when working in concert with local people, 'the respect shown to local providers by working alongside them [volunteers] is also perceived to be visible by the local patient population, which has a positive impact on the local provider's relationship with their community' (Green et al 2009). Two-way design also creates a stronger framework for preventing previously mentioned issues such as hidden costs to locals or geo-specific challenges such as local authority restrictions requiring reporting ahead. This is particularly the case as findings showed that stronger relationships correlated with lower risks, issues and costs to locals.

The simple act of discussion and planning between STV sending organisations and receiving local projects was seen to determine the quality of volunteering and the value created. It ensures the closest link between local needs and the support delivered. Reese (2009) states that 'westerners come bringing short-term solutions to long-term problems without asking local people what they know and are doing about these issues' – although there is evidence that discussions with local stakeholders happen in some contexts (see Morgan 2010). Simply put, 'in order to add value, find out what the locals need and include them in the decision-making process' (interviewee 1). This is fundamentally tied to respect for local insight and for local ownership – the calibre of relationship:

> Because, some of the friends when they come to Myanmar it is quite difficult to tell them, because when we go to orphanages, they hear that the children have needs and then they decide themselves without asking whether they are actual needs or not. And when they go back and raise the funds…without asking the locals…the first thing we want to request the team is, they should ask how is this orphanage? What is their vision, and are they faithful? And they should know about the orphanage before they raise the funds. The locals, we know who is faithful and who is not faithful. (interviewee 3)

Certainly this introduces the challenging aspect of control – including local elites potentially controlling the flow of support not necessarily based on 'merit'. However, it is fundamental to acknowledge that locals know their needs most intimately…they just need to be asked, or better still, involved. For the orphanage leaders interviewed, needs spanned life skills training for children, leadership training for leaders, psychology training for houseparents caring for children from diverse ethnicities, tailored discussions for young adults and so on. With notice, planning and more intentional matching of STV to local needs and opportunities, the value of short-term support can be amplified. In one case, some talked about orphanages banding together to benefit from tuition provided by STV – something otherwise outside their capacity to pay (focus group). Locals showed a clear understanding that people who undertake STV come with their own expectations as well. Their view was that the best starting point was a discussion between both parties of expectations, the desired support given, the desired support received, the practicalities of what can be achieved and what can be offered, and the resulting expenses, in order to map a way forward. In turn, this may mean visitors laying down potential desires to return home with a report of a tangible result.

Two-way design then avoids the 'ambiguous expectations' that lead to risks on both sides (Palacios 2010, p.870). It also creates a more robust framework for sending organisations' understanding over whether a local project is opening its doors with an expectation that financial support will follow. Mowforth and Munt (1998, p.104) link control with sustainability. It is the path to closing the gap between 'little or no demand' and growing supply (Webb 2008, p.iii, see also

Layden in Hawkins, Verstege & Flood 2013, p.23) and removes those instances of 'uninvited guests' where in reality a local project may not want volunteer support (Livermore 2006, p.9). And it is the most assured way for STV to focus on people who have the greatest need (Green et al 2009) and for projects to be sustainable by local people (see Reese 2009). Ideas such as fair trade labelling or certification of sending organisations (Fee & Mdee 2010) have been proposed in large part to ensure stronger design.

Hand-in-hand is matching support to need and volunteer to support. This particularly requires the two facilitating organisations to build a shared understanding of what volunteers can contribute and how that should best be managed (see Fee & Mdee 2010, p.234). Negotiating these mutually acceptable spaces for volunteer activity was also seen as the most effective way to avoid development 'drain' – the draw on local partners' time and resources in order to facilitate volunteer experiences. Acknowledging that different projects have differing need for specialist skill (Sherraden, Lough & McBride 2008, p.398), volunteer selection and matching to desired support is perhaps obvious but not as practised as it should be. The capacity to match effectively was again influenced by the quality of relationships. Those interviewed were not going to turn away volunteers but had clear preferences for support. Some of the orphanage leaders said that, if the volunteers shared their religious views, they would be able to interact more with the children and, for those that didn't, they could still paint a wall or dig a well (interviewee 3). On one level, this only reinforces the importance of the appropriate selection of volunteers for opportunities. On another level, it arguably calls for deeper discussions around expectations. Volunteer selection and skills matching is also critical because, for example, Australians would not unleash untrained teachers on children in Australia, begging the question of why is it appropriate to do so in developing countries (see Simpson 2007, Callanan & Thomas 2005). Or, in the case of young people working with AIDS victims, Callanan and Thomas (2005) state that 'it is questionable whether these teenagers are really equipped to manage the emotional and physical strain of these situations'.

A complementary aspect to overall design is the structure of group dynamics. Local feedback clearly showed that group-based STV should limit the number of volunteers (12 was suggested as a maximum), to enable a more manageable, less disruptive size for local projects and to create an environment where all volunteers could be hands-on, 'so there's nobody lost in the team' (interviewee 4). The latter was an interesting observation. It came from a local partner based on their observations of situations where some volunteers did not or were not able to interact with locals. This reinforces that, certainly among those interviewed, there was an understanding and respect for the need to provide, whenever possible, meaningful opportunities for volunteers as well as for local projects. Mutuality was well understood. Research from other countries shows the same preference for limiting the size of groups (see Green et al 2009). Connected to this was the preference for STV groups to visit fewer projects and provide more intensive volunteer support, without overstaying their welcome. This was strongly matched by the views of the volunteers surveyed, with 31 per cent preferring more sustained involvement with one project rather than short visits to numerous projects. Furthermore, when asked about their preferences if they were to return to Myanmar, the number rose to 75 per cent as wanting the opportunity to volunteer for a longer period at one of the projects visited. This supports the notion that longer involvement with fewer projects is considered to offer more value to both those visiting and local partners, working alongside the idea that short-term involvement should be underpinned by long-term relationships.

Delivery

Robust design creates the foundation for STV engagement with local projects – and delivery is what drives the ultimate conduct and quality, or value, of volunteering. Tailored preparation was commonly cited as an area of importance to locals. Preparation covers both sending and receiving parties. For volunteers, this means ensuring that groups visiting local projects clearly understand their roles prior to arrival. For example, Myanmar locals reflected on the lack of age-appropriate activities of past STV groups to orphanages. Another leader said that making STV more effective came down to preparation and flexibility 'because local people think you can do everything. They think you're coming, you're foreigners, you're speaking English, so you must be able to do everything' (interviewee 4, see also Palacios 2010, p.869). This includes ensuring that

contributions are culturally relevant (Schwartz 2003, p.30) and that volunteers have a well-rounded understanding of cultural realities they may find confronting. One local spoke of the need to understand local rules and restrictions, 'I've seen many well-intentioned people getting discouraged but actually you can't blame the authorities, they are doing their work, so you've got to be prepared. This is not like tourism' (interviewee 8). While specific to Myanmar, the broad notion of taking the time to understand cause and effect, and the dynamics that may be disrupted by the involvement of foreigners, stand for any context. The need for host preparation was touched on but not expanded. Webb (2008, p.iii) notes that the wealth of instruction for visitors meets a dearth of guidance for those receiving volunteers (described as a 'flaw' in design).

Pre-departure training, including cultural awareness training is central to increasing the likelihood of cultural sensitivity in the way volunteer activities are delivered. Livermore (2006a, p.11) says of shallow appreciation for culture:

> this tendency to gloss over differences was related to the overall simplistic observations and interpretations that occurred among the short-term missionaries studied. The subjects' actions and reflections revealed they often assumed smiling, nodding, and silence meant the same things for all people.

Livermore (2006, p.19) highlights the risk of cultural awareness training in making people feel like 'experts', hence the importance of a deeper approach – cultural intelligence (CQ). His CQ model incorporates knowledge CQ as understanding cultural differences; interpretive CQ as the ability to interpret cues; behavioural CQ as the capacity to act appropriately; and perseverance CQ as the desire to persevere through conflict (Livermore 2006b, p.112). This is potentially the most powerful way to combat the ''development is simple' message [which] undermines the need for political change and the support for long-term sustainable solutions' (Simpson 2007, see also Simpson 2004, p.682). Research more broadly shows that visitors generally revert to the 'assumptions and behaviours' they had prior to their STV experience (Livermore 2006, p.5) with substantial evidence of 'little or no significant positive impact' for participants in some studies (Ver Beek 2008, p.476). CQ then provides a more holistic framework for taking cultural awareness training to a higher level of effectiveness.

At a more grassroots level, simple preparation, such as learning the basics of the local language, conveys respect to the local context. Similarly, building on understanding through sharing experiences between volunteers can further enhance delivery. For example, in Myanmar, popping balloons can be frightening to children who have been exposed to war. GWM's relates to a number of orphanages and crossed that particular bridge a long time ago. Today, encouraging an understanding of cultural dynamics lessens the potential for activities to be presumed as universally fun. This applies to any experience where cultural assumptions can create a damaging gap between volunteer perceptions of what has taken place and local experiences. Cultural awareness can also help to lessen donations that encourage dependency or avoid financial behaviour that removes control from locals. One of the local leaders said that locals should always manage the purchase of materials being donated as 'that gives us more respect' (interviewee 3). Furthermore, they emphasised the need for donations to be managed through the receiving organisation, rather than given directly to individuals (without prior approval) or to individual projects (without prior discussion). Each touchpoint can make a positive impact or leave a wake of damage.

Potentially the most critical aspect of delivery is the recognition that 'being' is equally important, if not more so, than 'doing'. Reflecting on the benefits to both locals and volunteers through the research, intangible value was consistently emphasised. 'Being' significantly includes the interpersonal exchange of ideas, culture and experiences. This two-way role for building personal, human and social capital effectively became the bridge between the inability for STV to effect major 'change' and it nonetheless having value. For some, volunteer 'acts' were secondary. Local partners and volunteers alike identified the learning and sharing benefiting all parties. A learning mentality is, therefore, valid and essential to STV (Callanan & Thomas 2005, p.194). Ingram (2010, p.219) argues that 'volunteer tourism reduces development to an act of 'doing'', which may be true of some contexts, but this research clearly shows that people who are engaged in STV from the

local and visitor perspectives understand the deeper value. Schwartz (2004, p.12) says, 'if short-termers can learn the importance of "being" rather than "doing", great good can be accomplished'. Slimbach (2000, p.6) argues for volunteerings being 'discovers-learners first and teachers-servers second'. In all, preparation, backed by cultural awareness and the building of CQ, and a mentality that recognises the role for being as well as doing sets up STV delivery to be appropriate and constructive – and to ultimately deliver value.

The future of STV

STV is a permanent part of the development landscape for the foreseeable future. With this in mind, it is essential that it has the same 'aid effectiveness' expectations placed on it, if it is to support sustainable development – not dependency, and build understanding – not reinforce dominant hegemony. With the limitations of volunteering in mind, a reassessment of what it means to appropriately and constructively engage, at all stages, is necessary if STV is to create value.

Worldviews need to be interrogated to ensure that volunteering does not blithely deliver packaged, sanitised experiences that fail to consider and address their role in the lives of the communities they are intended to serve. It also needs to be assessed to ensure that benefits are not overstated or misappropriated. The issue is not whether we are asking 'too much' of volunteering, but whether we are expecting the wrong outcomes. Separating the 'drop-in and take' approach, from the 'stay and leave behind' approach, this research clearly shows that STV offers a higher order of intangible benefits that some allow. It has the capacity to build mutual personal, human and social capital, rather than simply delivering stuff, and so creates a new playing field for that idea of effectiveness. 'Do no harm' most certainly but, if volunteering is a dynamic mechanism with the potential to build stronger cross-cultural understanding, then it comes down to emphasising relationship models and design strategies and delivery frameworks that contribute to sustainable development with this in mind.

Relationships need to be invested in so that STV increasingly supports long-term strategies, without burdening each individual contribution. With partnership-based relationships, participation is more likely to be sincere, local ownership more possible and two-way design more practical. This, in turn, creates the scope for volunteering to better tap into asset-based community development, rather than solely meeting needs and bolstering dependency. Design needs to be challenged to ensure that the right people are applied to the 'right' volunteer support. And this needs to be context sensitive – building a house in one country may take a much needed job from a local whereas in another country it may help a family get back on their feet under circumstances were there a few alternatives. Improving the quality and value of STV is not about generically listing taboo services or holistically damning specific activities. It is about being acutely aware of what is taking place and taking the time to understand how a short-term activity has the power to support or undermine long-term strategy. Improving the future means not only strengthening the ability for volunteers to be good at 'doing' but also building their capacity in 'being', with the latter proving to be an overwhelmingly important element for local partners and for returned volunteers. Developing CQ is a key strategy in helping people make the transition to the conscious volunteer.

Then, investment is critically needed in measuring and understanding what is really happening – the impact of STV for local projects, for communities and individuals, and for volunteers. Without a 360-degree perspective, billions will continue to be invested in this global industry with a mixed bag of outcomes and value – and maybe not nearly as much cultural bridge building as would otherwise be possible.

Source list

Focus group – 17 leaders of an orphanage network for houseparents
Interviewee 1 – Expat, manager and developer of social enterprises
Interviewee 2 – National, church pastor and overseer of community development projects
Interviewee 3 – National, local manager of an international orphanage network
Interviewee 4 – National, manager of an NGO with multiple training operations
Interviewee 5 – National, manager of community development projects and orphanages
Interviewee 6 – National, manager of community development projects and a major orphanage
Interviewee 7 – National, orphanage manager and microfinance loan officer
Interviewee 8 – National, manager of agricultural development projects and a major orphanage
Interviewee 9 – National, orphanage manager
Interviewee 10 – National, orphanage manager
Interviewee 11 – Expat, head of a community development organisation
Interviewee 12 – Expat, manager of community development education programs

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