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International development volunteering as a catalyst for long-term prosocial behaviours of returned Canadian volunteers

ABSTRACT

This article documents the long-term impacts of international development volunteering (IDV) on the prosocial behaviours, educational or career choices, and global citizenship activities of returned international volunteers (RVs). Findings from a 2018 survey completed by 450 Canadian RVs show how IDV can contribute to global citizenship and civic engagement. Qualitative and quantitative analyses demonstrate how IDV can help to build a more empathetic and justice-oriented society dedicated to addressing the causes and consequences of global poverty and

KEYWORDS

global citizenship
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civic engagement

1. The term Global South refers to countries that have low overall Gross National Product (GNP) or a low ranking in the Human Development Index (HDI), where rates of poverty, inequality and insecurity are usually high.

inequality. As a distinctive model for transformational learning, this study illustrates the value of IDV as a model for cross-cultural education shaping values of global civic responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

International development volunteering (IDV) has a history dating back to the 1950s (Sobocinska 2017). It is a specialized form of volunteering facilitated by not-for-profit international volunteer cooperation organizations (IVCOs) that offer humanitarian engagement from volunteers living and working in partner countries in the Global South (Chen 2018; McLachlan and Binns 2018; Schech et al. 2015).¹ IDV programmes are characterized by their focus on reciprocity in learning, capacity-building, cross-cultural education and a commitment to addressing the causes (rather than the symptoms) of partner community needs (McLachlan and Binns 2018; Devereux 2008; Larkin 2015). IDV is distinct from other forms of volunteering abroad, such as voluntourism, which are generally characterized by their short-term (one to two weeks) nature (Mostafanezhad 2014) and for-profit programme models (McGloin and Georgeou 2015).

Typical educational goals of IDV programmes include developing the skills and capacities of people in partner communities, the development of volunteers' intercultural skills and civic engagement behaviours. Yet, despite more than 60 years of IDV practice, the effectiveness of these learning goals and the subsequent contributions of returned volunteers (RVs) to their local and global communities are largely unknown. To help fill this gap, this article situates RVs' experiences within broader scholarship on the intersection between IDV and global civic engagement, with a focus on the transformative learning capacity of IDV and its effects on the domestic engagement of volunteers after returning to Canada.

From a policy perspective, IDV can play an important role in preparing a globally engaged citizenry that understands and supports Canada's international initiatives and programmes, is aware of global issues and is capable of intercultural cooperation. Such programmes are valued co-curriculars in Canadian educational strategies for global citizenship (Bickmore 2014). RVs play a role as the 'public faces of development [...] in mediating connections between the "southern poor", development organizations, and northern individuals' (Smith and Yanacopulos 2004: 661) and as activists pressing for societal changes and social justice through their career and voluntary activities. The activities taken up by RVs tell an important story about prosocial global civic engagement resulting from the IDV experience.

We use the term 'prosocial' to describe behaviours and activities used to benefit others or society (locally and globally). Some examples include career and study changes to better understand social inequalities and promote structural justice; activism and advocacy for policy change; and volunteering with programmes that contribute to the improved wellbeing of others in local communities and around the world. Broadly defined, prosocial behaviour entails 'involvement in and service to a community' with the intention of helping others or to have a 'beneficial social impact' (Omoto and Snyder 2009: 224). Developing a better understanding of programmes that encourage prosocial behaviours enables governments and organizations to refine their

efforts to foster such attitudes and actions in order to address societal challenges and achieve social goals (Stürmer and Snyder 2009).

Global civic engagement generally refers to the attitudes, identities and actions of those who are committed to social justice and cross-cultural understanding. Global civic engagement – or global citizenship, as it is often called – encompasses thin (passive or awareness-oriented practices) and thick (transformative, activist and change-oriented) engagements (Cameron 2014; Dobson 2006). We ascribe three qualities or themes to global civic engagement in this article. These are exhibited by returned volunteers: intercultural relationship building (relational commitments); active engagement (behaviours and actions); and enduring commitments that are sustained over time (time and impact).

EVIDENCE OF RETURNED VOLUNTEERS' IMPACTS ON THEIR HOME COMMUNITIES

Existing research on international volunteering suggests that these experiences can be effective methods for adult education, and can have lifelong prosocial impacts. It is noted that many RVs remain active in their communities or in international development work long after returning home. For example, Kelly and Case (2007) report that 67% of RVs indicated that their volunteer experience had contributed to philanthropic career paths and repeated stints of volunteering. Further, 60% of RV survey respondents in a study by Universalia et al. (2005) reported remaining involved in community or service groups related to international development work. Of the Canadians who volunteered abroad, 58% of the female participants and 37% of the male participants believed that their international volunteer experience had a direct impact on their career goals. In addition, 46% of returned volunteers said their future career decisions had been affected by their overseas experience. In another study, when participants were asked whether current employment was related to work conducted while overseas on international volunteering placements, 47% of the respondents said yes (Tiessen and Heron 2012). For many RVs, the overseas experience was important for testing a career choice (Tiessen 2014).

As scholarly research in international volunteering has pointed out, studies on the educational impacts of RVs must take into consideration the range of programme modalities, as well as preparation and engagement strategies undertaken by different volunteer sending organizations (Sherraden et al. 2008). The studies by Kelly and Case (2007), Tiessen and Heron (2012) and Tiessen (2018) were all conducted with Canadian-specific samples. The latter two studies were based on small windows of longitudinal analysis (generally within six months to a year after return) and had a specific focus on certain programme modalities, such as medium-term (three- to six-month) placements. The study by Kelly and Case (2007) was focused on a particular organization and the specific commitments made by volunteers from one programme serving 24 months or longer. The diversity of programmes taken up by Canadians calls for a more comprehensive analysis of the suite of options available to international volunteers in order to assess these experiences in relation to prosocial behaviours.

Fee and Gray (2013) address the unique learning outcomes among Australian international development volunteers. Their research demonstrates that 'expatriates experienced learning outcomes that were more frequently transformational'

2. The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

in comparison to a control group working domestically (2013: 196). Unlike most learning, transformational learning is not incremental, and it causes the individual to question their assumptions, adopt new perspectives and alter their values (Fee and Gray 2013: 198). Similar evidence from international service-learning (ISL) programmes indicates their transformative potential for developing personal and global awareness and skills (Liu et al. 2019; Bamber 2016; Hamby and Brinberg 2016). Of particular import are what Archer (1986) calls ‘cultural bumps’, or the day-to-day cross-cultural experiences of international volunteers, which can have significant impacts on their learning. In one longitudinal study, Starr demonstrated that experiences abroad constitute ‘turning points’ for volunteers, generating ‘critical changes’ and ‘new beginnings’ (1994: 137) that may translate into prosocial behaviours. Such prosocial behaviours can include changes to career and study paths, as well as more values-oriented effects, such as prioritization of, and engagement in, global assistance.

Published studies have yet to demonstrate sufficiently whether global civic engagement has materialized among RVs and whether it endures over the long term. This study aims to fill this gap by retrospectively assessing continued engagement by Canadian RVs in prosocial activities and behaviours. Building on the small body of extant research on changes to RVs’ attitudes and behaviours, the present study analyses survey responses provided by 450 Canadian returned international volunteers.² Using multiple linear regression analyses and an open-coding protocol of qualitative data, we demonstrate that participants who rated their volunteer time abroad as a ‘transformational experience’ were more likely to prioritize or provide global assistance and to make prosocial study or career choices, thus exhibiting enhanced global civic engagement.

METHODS

Survey development

Researchers developed a survey to measure RVs’ volunteering and giving behaviours after returning to Canada. The survey questions were designed to measure the perceived impacts of the international volunteer experience on a variety of attitudes and behaviours. The survey instrument was developed in both French and English, with bilingual back-translation to ensure a similar meaning of survey questions in both languages.

Sample recruitment

Survey participants were recruited through close collaboration with twelve of the VCP-affiliated international volunteer cooperation organizations (IVCOs) to access potential participants. Between January and August 2018, these IVCOs were contacted with information about the study and given opportunities to provide feedback on the strategies for reaching returned international volunteers, feedback on the draft survey questions and insights into the potential value and impact of the proposed research. To facilitate updates to the IVCOs’ RV databases, researchers offered support to all participating IVCOs and, in three instances, visited their headquarters to access RV databases and to update contact information.

Data collection

The final survey was sent to more than 45 volunteer sending organizations and IVCOs in September 2018, with a note including instructions for how to distribute the information about the survey to their respective RV lists. Links to the survey website were also provided in this communication. All communication material was provided in French and English. Information about the survey was also communicated through social media including e-mail listservs, Twitter and Facebook. In total, 450 valid responses were received. Social media links to the survey were open access, and thus the final response rate is unknown. Descriptive statistics of the survey respondents are summarized in Table 1.

Quantitative analysis

Two separate multiple linear regression analyses were regressed on each of two dependent variables (i.e. global assistance and philanthropic career changes). These composite variables were developed using principal component analyses (PCA) as data reduction processes. The two dependent variables are composites of three or four discrete survey questions – each question using a five-point Likert-type answer set. The acceptability threshold for component loadings was set at $\lambda = .60$. Composite variables were also tested for reliability using Cronbach's alpha reliability analyses, with a reliability threshold of $\alpha = .70$. The value of the composite variables is the average of all component questions, where at least three valid (i.e. non-missing) questions were required for each average score (see Table 2).

Independent variables

Regression analyses included five independent variables: (1) duration (in weeks) of volunteer service for the main organization; (2) a log₁₀ transformation (due to unacceptably high skew and kurtosis) of the total number of past volunteer experiences outside of Canada; (3) group status, where 0 = in a group of 2 or more volunteers, 1 = individual placement; (4) placement purpose, where 0 = skills transfer or capacity development, 1 = to enhance cross-cultural understanding; 'other' purposes ($n = 34$) were recoded into one of these two categories based on the qualitative interpretation of response; (5) a five-point Likert-type scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree) responding to the prompt: 'volunteering abroad was a "transformational experience" (one that resulted in significant changes in my life that probably would not have occurred if I had not participated in volunteering)'.

Control variables

Regression analyses also included five control variables namely: (1) sex at birth, where 1 = male, 0 = female; one case of 'prefer not to answer' was coded as missing; (2) age in years; (3) education, where 0 = Bachelor's level degree or lower, 1 = university certificate or diploma or a degree above the Bachelor's level; because respondents were highly educated, binary recoding was performed to capture this variance; (4) political views, where 0 = middle to right, 1 = left; recoded with this split due to a high number of left-leaning views, and (5) religiosity, where 0 = no religious attendance in past year, 1 = religious attendance at least once in past year; recoded to capture meaningful variance.

Category	Frequency (n)	%
Biological sex		
Male	114	36.2
Female	200	63.5
Other/prefer not to answer	1	0.3
Ethnicity		
White	248	79.0
Black	21	6.7
Asian	19	6.1
Pacific Islands	1	0.3
Hispanic	8	2.6
Aboriginal	7	2.2
Other	10	3.2
Marital status		
Married or common law	168	55.6
Single, never married	97	32.1
Separated or divorced	35	11.6
Widow or widower	2	0.7
Education completed		
Graduated from high school, equivalent or less	12	6.1
Pre-university degree (college-level training)	19	6.1
Bachelor's degree	78	24.9
University certificate/diploma, degree to Bachelor's level	197	62.9
Continuous variables		
Total weeks travelled abroad	188.2	280.7
Total number of times travelled internationally	32.9	66.0
Age	44.1	14.1
Personal income (CAD, recoded)	\$59,000	\$37,000
Household income (CAD, recoded)	\$85,000	\$47,000

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of survey respondents.

Thematic analysis

Participant responses to ten open-ended questions were analysed using thematic content analysis (Mayring 2000). Three of the ten questions were descriptive of the IVCOs and the location of the placement. The other seven questions were analysed by establishing thematic categories based on a data-driven open-coding protocol. Recurring themes and comments were grouped and adjusted iteratively as analysis progressed. Responses to each open-ended question were then tallied to articulate the prevalence of themes. Particularly relevant, descriptive or informative quotations from participants were subsequently highlighted and extracted in order to illuminate findings from the study. In total, 1137 open-ended responses were analysed.

Composite variable and indicators	α^{**}	\bar{x}	<i>sd</i>	Λ^*
<i>Philanthropic career changes</i>	0.86	3.6	1.27	
As a direct result of my international volunteer experience, I decided to pursue a field of study related to social or economic development				0.882
As a direct result of my international volunteer experience, I decided to pursue a career related to social or economic development				0.929
It encouraged me to make career changes that focused more on helping others				0.833
<i>Global assistance ψ</i>	0.74	3.7	0.96	
As a direct result of my international volunteer experience, I am more involved with international humanitarian or development projects				0.756
After volunteering abroad, helping people in other countries became a higher priority in my life				0.807
I am an advocate for increasing Canada's foreign aid spending				0.734
I contribute more money to international organizations now than I did before volunteering abroad				0.711

*Acceptability threshold of λ set at .60, **Threshold of $\alpha = .70$, ψ At least three valid indicators required

Table 2: Principal component and reliability analyses.

FINDINGS

Results from this study are presented in two discrete sections. The first section reports on findings from multivariate analysis of the survey data, separated by three main outcome areas: (1) the general satisfaction of volunteers and transformational changes to the RVs' perspectives as a result of their experience; (2) RVs' prioritization of global assistance; and (3) philanthropic career changes made by RVs. The second section reports on various outcomes emerging from univariate analyses and open-ended survey responses. These outcomes delve deeper into RVs' prosocial behaviours by investigating: involvement in international humanitarian and development projects; degree of helping people abroad directly; advocacy for increasing foreign aid spending; financial contributions to international organizations; engagement with locally based prosocial activities; pursuing studies and careers related to social and economic development; and other career changes focused on helping others. In a few cases, univariate summaries of discrete survey questions are included in this section to support the qualitative and quantitative linkages within outcomes.

Findings from multivariate analysis

General satisfaction and transformational shifts

Overall, survey respondents were quite satisfied with their international volunteer experience. On a scale of 1–10, where 10 equals highly satisfied, the average rating across respondents (aggregated across up to three IVCOs) was 8.11. Although this statistic is not a result from multivariate analysis, it provides important background for this section given generally positive correlations between organizational satisfaction and perceived personal changes. Survey respondents were also asked to rate the degree to which international

volunteering with the IVCO was a 'transformational experience' (measured as an experience that resulted in significant changes in their life that probably would not have occurred if they had not participated in volunteering). In response to this statement, 19% of respondents agreed and 58% strongly agreed.

Select responses to open-ended survey questions can illuminate the minority of respondents (23%) who did not assess their IVCO experience to be 'transformational'. Some reflections aligned with the critical literature on international volunteering as ultimately benefiting the volunteer, with limited impact for host communities (Tiessen and Heron 2012), such as, 'I think the government has to stop funding so-called volunteer trips. Total hypocrisy'. Some respondents indicated that volunteering had long been a part of their lives, thus limiting the extent to which it could be classified as 'transformational'. One respondent explained that international volunteering was in fact an expression of a prior transformational change in their life, rather than a driver of such change. Further, a small number of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the operational capacities of sending and/or host organizations, which negatively impacted their experience of volunteering abroad.

Prioritization of global assistance

Respondents who were more likely to rate their volunteer time abroad as a 'transformational experience' were also far more likely to prioritize or provide global assistance ($t = 6.79$, $df = 221$, $p < .001$) controlling for other variables in the model. For control variables, older volunteers ($t = 2.37$, $p < .05$) with a higher education ($t = 2.15$, $p < .05$) and higher religiosity ($t = 2.39$, $p < .05$) were also more likely to prioritize or provide global assistance.

Philanthropic career changes

Respondents who were more likely to rate their volunteer time abroad as transformational were also far more likely to make prosocial study or career choices focused on helping others ($t = 6.79$, $df = 221$, $p < .001$) controlling for other variables in the model. For control variables, volunteers with a higher education ($t = 2.11$, $p < .05$) were also more likely to make prosocial study or career choices focused on helping others. On the whole, about six out of ten respondents believed that, as a direct result of their international volunteer experience, they made philanthropic changes to their studies or careers (i.e. they pursued a study or career direction related to social or economic development or helping others). Results of the quantitative analysis are summarized in Table 3.

Findings from univariate and thematic analysis

Global assistance

Consistent with results from the multivariate analysis, open-ended responses contained a variety of indicators suggesting that RVs gained a greater awareness and understanding of the importance of global assistance. For example, in response to the question, 'In what ways was your life changed by your international volunteer experience?', 19% of respondents expressed an enhanced awareness and understanding of social and economic development issues, while only 2% were inspired to look inward to domestic issues, developing an enhanced political awareness.

	Global assistance (n = 221)					Philanthropic careers (n = 196)				
	B	SE	β	T	p	B	SE	β	t	p
(Constant)	1.36	0.31		4.43	0.000	1.89	0.44		4.34	0.000
Times volunteered (lg10)	0.18	0.19	0.06	0.91	0.365	0.21	0.28	0.05	0.74	0.459
Duration (weeks)	0.00	0.00	0.02	0.30	0.763	0.00	0.00	0.12	1.77	0.079
Cross-cultural mission	-0.09	0.14	-0.05	-0.65	0.519	0.06	0.20	0.03	0.33	0.745
Solo experience	0.17	0.13	0.09	1.31	0.192	0.02	0.18	0.01	0.09	0.929
Transformational	0.33**	0.05	0.41	6.79	0.000	0.44*	0.07	0.41	6.21	0.000
Sex (male)	0.04	0.12	0.02	0.33	0.738	-0.14	0.17	-0.06	-0.84	0.405
Age	0.01*	0.00	0.15	2.37	0.019	-0.01	0.01	-0.12	-1.75	0.082
Education (> Bachelor)	0.25*	0.12	0.13	2.15	0.033	0.36*	0.17	0.14	2.11	0.037
Political views (left)	0.18	0.13	0.08	1.38	0.170	-0.13	0.19	-0.05	-0.67	0.502
Religious (some)	0.27*	0.11	0.14	2.39	0.018	0.30	0.16	0.12	1.88	0.062

Table 3: Results of multivariate regression analyses on RVs' prosocial behaviours.

Other indicators of a higher prioritization of global assistance linked to cross-cultural connections. These included 10% who indicated enhanced cross-cultural communication skills; 6% who felt that they had increased empathy and openness; and 84% who said they now had more friends, acquaintances and contacts who lived in other countries. Only 2% indicated that they had gained skills in social justice and ethics. Although enhanced awareness, openness and cross-cultural communication – all characteristics of global citizenship identities – are not direct indicators of increased action, they are suggestive of heightened engagement and ongoing interest. Importantly, they also represent a higher priority given to global assistance by RVs. This interpretation is supported by psychological research demonstrating the correlation of global citizenship identities and prosocial values, including 'intergroup empathy', 'social justice', 'intergroup helping' and 'a felt responsibility to act for the betterment of the world' (Reysen and Katzarska-Miller 2013: 858).

Involvement in international humanitarian and development projects

Around 65% of respondents agreed that they had become more involved with international humanitarian or development projects after volunteering abroad. Survey responses pertaining to volunteering behaviours upon return to Canada showed that most RVs volunteered for organizations with an exclusively domestic focus (60%), while 27% focused on both domestic and international issues and 13% were exclusively or mostly focused on international issues.

Respondents were asked whether they would like to say more about why their interest in volunteering in Canada had changed after volunteering abroad. Nearly one in five respondents (17%) expressed a motivation to continue in such work, feeling that their time abroad 'humanized' the problems and needs in developing countries, generating heightened compassion, awareness and motivation to contribute. As one RV expressed, the IDV experience put them

‘much more in tune [with] and aware of the plight of people around the world’. The RV used the language of compassion and empathy to explain how they felt about their prosocial contributions. This empathy is underscored by their reflections on how locally based situations in Canada ‘can easily transport me back overseas to individuals I met and the situations they face’. The impact of this empathy and reflection is a sense of duty or responsibility to act on this knowledge and ‘to build awareness amongst people here about the realities that people face overseas’.

Responses such as these more firmly established the correlation of enhanced awareness and openness with increased action and prioritization of global assistance. For some respondents, the volunteer experience augmented their awareness of needs abroad, resulting in ongoing commitments to international assistance. Among returned international volunteers, 38% reported providing technical or financial support to at least one host community or organization abroad within the past year. Removing the 18% of most recently returned volunteers (who finished their volunteer placement after 2017) from the analysis unexpectedly increased this rate of assistance (to 43%). Therefore, more than two-fifths of returned volunteers continued to aid or support the host community or organization even after having returned to Canada for eighteen months or more.

Several participants identified additional commitments to both global and local prosocial efforts. One survey participant said: ‘[I] have been a board member on the working board for a struggling non-profit in Canada while also continuing to provide volunteer support to another organization back in the Caribbean where I volunteered when overseas’. Another participant said they were slightly more disengaged from locally based volunteer work, focusing more on international work. IDV can therefore have a direct and enduring impact on the degree to which RVs prioritize and contribute to international humanitarian and development projects upon their return.

Higher prioritization of helping others abroad

Around 65% of respondents agreed that helping people in other countries became a higher priority in their lives after volunteering abroad. We provide several examples below to consider the ongoing interest in globally focused prosocial behaviours of RVs. For some of the participants, their ongoing engagement in international work involved volunteer work – sometimes weekly – with an international non-governmental organization. One person expressed their volunteer work as ‘allow[ing] me to focus on international issues while living locally’. The commitment to doing internationally focused work while back in Canada was often expressed in relation to building awareness in home communities ‘about the realities that people face overseas’. The work that is done locally was even described as solidarity work that links with international communities in meaningful ways and builds on ‘a greater sense of solidarity and connection between nations’, evoking a conception of global citizenship. These qualitative responses reinforced and helped to explain the quantitative findings that helping people in other countries became a higher priority in RVs’ lives.

Advocacy for increasing foreign aid spending

The connection between local actions and international work was further reinforced in the commitments to advocating for increasing Canada's foreign aid spending. Quantitatively, around 70% agreed that they advocate for increasing Canada's foreign aid spending (though this was not explicitly linked as a change resulting from their international experience). This link was somewhat stronger considering that nearly half of respondents agreed that they contribute more money to international organizations now than they did before volunteering abroad. The experience abroad was expressed qualitatively as one that '[h]umanized the situation and [thus I] understood the importance of supporting communities in the field according to their needs'. This new understanding then translated into an appreciation for how RVs can influence Canadian international development policy as citizen advocates by using their 'knowledge and experience to engage parliamentarians, policymakers, the media and ordinary Canadians on global poverty issues and solutions'. The experience abroad was also considered in relation to a more critical view of Canada's international role and how development work is (or should be) done.

Locally based prosocial activities

For the study participants who described their prosocial activities as locally based or domestic commitments, the work included a variety of contributions, such as community associations or projects (27% of overall responses), political parties or elections (16%), advocacy efforts (7%) and First Nations organizations or projects (4%). When asked to expand on why their interest in volunteering in Canada had changed after volunteering abroad, 9% of respondents said they were inspired to undertake more politically oriented volunteer work and engage more in civic life. The experience abroad for many (15%) led people to look inward to Canadian challenges, heightening their awareness of the scope of issues and their sense of responsibility to engage domestically. It is noteworthy that 11% of respondents indicated that their interest in volunteering domestically existed long before their experience abroad and had not changed as a result. The activities surrounding domestic volunteering work were also, at times, framed as more activist-related work after returning home: '[From] my first experience, I would say that my volunteering in Canada became more politically and social justice focused' and 'this volunteering is in fact more a light form of activism'. In exhibiting increased advocacy and activism, as well as a proclivity for domestic political volunteering, several participants demonstrated how concern with – and prioritization of – global issues can be embedded in locally based prosocial activities and volunteer work.

Financial contributions to international organizations

Many of the qualitative comments also highlighted the nature of increased financial contributions in support of international work. Although the proportion of people who donated to charitable organizations was nearly the same between the two populations – RVs and the wider Canadian public – the average annual amount of the donations per person was higher for RVs (\$1176) compared with the general Canadian population in 2013 (\$531) (Statistics Canada 2018). This figure, however, does not account for differences in the

sample of RVs (e.g. higher education and income) compared with the general Canadian population, nor does it consider any differences in inflation or other time-based monetary differences from 2013 to 2018.

Returned international volunteers described their experiences as opportunities to learn about global issues, which inspired them to demonstrate ongoing support through financial contributions to organizations that continued this work. For those who indicated they did not have time for volunteering, references were made to regularized donations – sometimes monthly – to international organizations that support prosocial work overseas. First-hand understanding of the challenges of international work during volunteer abroad programmes was linked to an appreciation of the complexity of this field and a commitment to ongoing donations to ‘aid organization[s] even though some projects just don’t work!’

Pursuing studies related to social and economic development

Qualitative comments provided to the question ‘In what ways was your life changed by your international volunteer experience?’ show that 22% of respondents expressed a motivation to contribute to the field of development, including making career and/or schooling changes or feeling increased resolve to continue on their chosen career/study paths. Focusing on study changes specifically, over a fifth of these respondents indicated that they had made a study change as a result of their international volunteer experience, or otherwise felt that their time abroad reinforced or strengthened their desire to continue their studies in a field related to international development.

For some of the study participants, their life changes resulted in decisions to pursue graduate work (MA or Ph.D.) in international development studies programmes. Undertaking additional graduate work was perceived to have career benefits ‘which [...] opened up many career opportunities’. For some participants, their academic interest shifted considerably from fields in science to prosocial academic programmes. One participant explained: ‘I went from pursuing an academic career in theoretical chemistry to one in international development. I could probably write a book about the personal transformation that took place’. For others, the experience abroad afforded an opportunity to revisit goals and aspirations for prosocial careers, beginning with additional educational training in the field. As one person noted, the experience abroad ‘renewed my passion to study and become involved in human rights, international development, [and] gender equality’. Comments such as these express the transformative experience of volunteering abroad and provide testimonials of the concrete measures RVs have taken to commit themselves to prosocial, global assistance fields.

Pursuing careers related to social and economic development

Focusing on career changes, of the 22% of respondents who expressed a motivation to contribute to the field of social and economic development, more than half (53%) indicated that they either made a career change as a result of their international volunteer experience, or otherwise felt that their time abroad reinforced or strengthened their desire to work in this field. Explanations provided by the participants included reflections on the significance of the ‘utterly transformative’ experience. The pathways that emerge as a result of international volunteering are often explained by survey participants

as study changes, which lead to new opportunities to work in prosocial careers, sometimes directly linked to international development work. Several participants were able to use their international volunteer experiences to launch careers that allowed them to continue working in the country where the placement took place.

Survey participants who indicated long careers of 25 years or more in international development work, documented with rich detail their career trajectories, including the steps between their volunteer placement and their current positions. They noted the nature of different work contracts, combined with returns to university for graduate studies, followed by information about positions abroad with international development organizations (often for extended periods of two or more years per country), all of which they directly link to their IDV experience.

Other survey participants highlighted the way the volunteer abroad experience resulted in a major change in career focus: '[I] completely changed my career path from philosophy or law to international development/cooperation. Currently living abroad for 2+ years working in the same country where I did my volunteer placements'. The comments provided by survey participants were overall positive regarding the shaping of careers. As one person wrote: 'I am now working as a journalist focusing on issues related to sustainable travel and international development [and] [...] a huge advocate for the change that volunteering abroad can have in young people's lives'. This RV spoke about the IDV experience as a 'foundation for understanding the economies of developing countries and some of the factors that affect global politics' – a foundation for a lifetime of work.

The prevalence of career changes among RVs is indicative of the lifetime commitment to global assistance that resulted from the international volunteering experience for many participants. Further, open-ended comments indicated a predominant pathway of international volunteering inspiring study changes that generate new opportunities for work, which subsequently evolve into long careers in globally focused prosocial work.

Career changes focused on helping others

Beyond specifically mentioning international development career paths, numerous survey participants reinforced the value of the international volunteering experience in terms of careers that enabled them to engage generally in prosocial work – or work that allowed them to help others. Of the 22% who expressed a motivation to contribute to the field of social and economic development when asked how their lives had changed as a result of their international volunteer experience, a quarter indicated a desire to make career changes focused on helping others, but not directly related to international development.

The values shared by the participants also included civic engagement with socio-economic issues at home, particularly with immigrant and Indigenous communities in Canada. As one participant noted, 'I became more aware of social and economic development issues as well as cultural differences which enabled me to better understand social and economic issues in Canada as well as understand cultural differences in multicultural Canada'. Several participants noted how the international volunteer experience inspired their interest in working with newcomer communities in Canada. These RVs considered the experience one that taught relational skills, and as one person said, 'I could

really relate to their [newcomers'] experience being in a new country that they didn't know, that they couldn't speak the language. I am now a social worker working with refugees'. In reflecting on other work done to support immigrant communities in Canada, another participant wrote that the international volunteer placement renewed their 'desire to work with immigrants', specifically in the areas of literacy and economic opportunities. To further develop the skills needed for this work, the RV enrolled in a programme to learn how to teach English as a second language while volunteering as an English tutor in the community.

Other participants linked their volunteer abroad experience to careers in non-profit work. The nature of 'giving back' and helping their home communities is linked to their prosocial careers and understandings of their philanthropic work. As one participant noted, 'I contribute a lot to my community via my career' – a reality that is often not well captured in studies of volunteering and philanthropy. Several participants linked their international experiences to a clearer understanding of injustices and inequalities in the Canadian context. Several referenced the need for improved strategies to address poverty and inequality experienced by Indigenous peoples in Canada. One of the RVs, who self-identified as a Native woman who had felt 'marginalized and victimized' herself, recounted how she became 'grossly aware of how little Canadian populations regard or care for its Indigenous populations'. The experience of IDV 'made me more passionate for serving the Indigenous communities across our nation' and inspired her to use her international experience to address 'the harm happening in rural Canada' among Indigenous communities.

The IDV experience was also transformational for RVs who gained improved understandings of privilege. As 'a typical white kid in the suburbs [...] my life would have been very different without' the volunteer abroad experience. Even for those participants who did not consider their current work to be directly related to international development careers, there was a clear connection between the prosocial qualities of their work and their international exposure. As one survey participant wrote, the experience of being an international volunteer is 'woven into the fabric of my life'. The influences of the IDV programme, they went on to explain, are 'hard to separate from who and what I am now'. While RVs' current work may not have been directly related to social justice or international development, they believed their current work was 'influenced by it and is reflected in their values, choices, ethics, interests, capabilities, [and] directions'. Of significance to several survey participants was the impact of the volunteer abroad experience on their daily life choices – including, for some, decisions about how they raised their children.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The study findings demonstrate how participation in IDV generates opportunities for transformational learning. As a method of continuing education, experiences abroad positively impact participants' prosocial behaviours, encouraging RVs to embark on career or study trajectories in social and economic development, as well as inspiring them to engage in global assistance activities, such as volunteering, charitable donations and advocacy work. These programmes have the potential to positively contribute to expanding global civic engagement and global citizenship education among Canadians, shaping a globally engaged electorate that understands and prioritizes development assistance,

and thus supports government initiatives and programmes to address global concerns.

The survey findings further highlight the relationship between IDV and ongoing prosocial behaviours, both in the immediate and long-term for those who returned to Canada. Taken together, these findings reinforce earlier studies that show how international volunteering can effectively educate citizens on the value of prosocial behaviour at home and abroad (Kelly and Case 2007; Tiessen and Heron 2012; Universalia et al. 2005; Larkin 2015). In addition, they extend and complement these studies by assessing long-term changes in the prosocial attitudes and behaviours experienced by RVs years later.

Positive learning outcomes were evident in the eight major areas examined above: increased prioritization of global assistance; involvement in international humanitarian and development projects; higher prioritization of helping others abroad; support for increased government foreign aid spending; undertaking locally based prosocial activities; financial support for the sending organization and its broader work; changes in study paths; and changes in career choices, either toward the international development sector, or other prosocial 'helping' careers. These findings can be considered in the context of global civic engagement values, particularly in terms of (1) the relational and solidarity-oriented impacts; (2) the emphasis on active engagement including advocacy work and career work and (3) the enduring impact of these catalytic experiences. The discussion below further elaborates on these three cross-cutting themes.

Relational impacts were captured in reference to the connections that RVs formed with other volunteers, development workers and locals in partner communities. Some of the prosocial activities linked understandings of social justice and marginalization and/or poverty to Canadian realities. Other participants viewed their global justice impact in the changes they could make locally. Some RVs noted that their key contribution to international work is through their ongoing commitments to improve Canadians' understanding of international issues. Other RVs highlighted their regularized contributions to international organizations and ongoing participation in the networks forged when they were international volunteers.

The emphasis on the human side of the connectivity or relational experience is highly evident in the qualitative findings, with references to the IDV experience as one that puts a human face on development and international inequality. Interactions with partner communities through IDV humanized their knowledge or understanding, moving beyond ambivalent expressions of 'embracing the Other' or 'coping with difference' towards a more critical global citizenship education and identities (Zembylas 2013; Andreotti 2006; Larkin 2015; Bamber 2016). The emphasis among some of the RVs on solidarity values is also noteworthy, as it speaks to a commitment that is based in shared concerns and responsibility, or thick global citizenship rather than thin global citizenship values (Cameron 2014), such as charity or passive compassion for the suffering of others.

In relation to active civic engagement and advocacy, respondents made many references to building awareness, sharing information and educating Canadians. Awareness-building can be a relatively passive process if it is solely informational and not linked to changed attitudes and behaviours. Among the RVs, however, there were many references to a more activist orientation in their contributions, including advocacy work and active citizenship. The emphasis placed by some participants on the blurred lines between global

civic engagement in their paid and unpaid employment brings a new set of insights into the level of prosocial commitments exhibited by RVs. Many RVs expressed their commitment to justice and social change in their volunteer work as deeply intertwined with their careers, making it difficult to delineate between the two. Taken together, this heightened commitment to – and prioritization of – global assistance and prosocial activities contributes to producing an engaged, globally minded electorate of citizens, reinforcing their roles as ‘public faces of development’ (Smith and Yanacopoulos 2004) as well as their deep and action-oriented global civic engagement.

The third substantive theme emerging from these findings is the longevity of the prosocial behaviours and the sustained commitments RVs express to global civic engagement. The IDV experience was not generally viewed among the RVs in this study as a one-off experience that was unrelated to their lives and work. Rather, the IDV placement served ‘as a foundation’ that launched their commitments to prosocial change. A particularly noteworthy finding from the study was the emphasis on career changes that resulted from exposure to the volunteer work completed abroad. This work was described as ‘transformational’ or ‘pivotal’, shaping not just the kind of careers people pursued after returning home, but also the ongoing values developed through this work. This speaks to the enduring global citizenship engagement observed in these findings as well as the expansion of such values and commitments to prosocial activities throughout the lives of the RVs.

It is important to recognize that not all the RVs’ recollections were positive, nor were all reported changes constructive. While the majority of respondents agreed with the measures of prosocial changes, a marginal percentage disagreed with these sentiments. For instance, some RVs expressed concern with the use of funds that are earmarked for international development work to educate Canadians overseas, evoking much of the critical and post-colonial literature linking both international volunteering and international service learning programmes with the broader neo-liberal professionalization of development (Baillie Smith and Laurie 2011; Chapman 2018). Some RVs commented on the ‘ineffective use of resources and mediocre performance of staff’, as well as the ‘lack of monitoring and poor results year after year’. Others noted experiencing ‘burn out’ or ‘trauma’ while abroad, which mitigated their learning and negatively affected their desire to volunteer again or pursue development-related careers. Further research is needed to understand why international volunteering may turn some people away from socially constructive career choices or may deepen their criticism of global assistance policies and practices.

Future research could also benefit from expanding the sampling frame to capture the many more Canadians who take part in diverse volunteer abroad options. Future research can also more carefully distinguish between different programme modalities, taking into consideration the growing number of short-term and for-profit volunteer sending organizations (organizations that were not the focus of this study). More in-depth qualitative work can also help unpack some of the comparatively brief comments provided in the open-ended survey questions. For example, it is not known what specific forms of advocacy and activism RVs engage in. It is also difficult to know what features of RVs’ experiences correlate with a heightened advocacy of direct, politically based action.

Similarly, additional qualitative evidence on the conditions whereby an international volunteering experience becomes a ‘transformational learning’

experience would help IVCOs to programme for educational opportunities. Importantly, further investigation is also needed into the horizontal and vertical impacts of international volunteering to fully understand the scope of its effects, including intergenerational impacts, as well as the pathways of influence returned volunteers exert on their various circles of influence – from family and friends to their elected representatives.

In summary, this research adds an important layer to the analysis of IDV and informs broader international development and global citizenship scholarship. The findings demonstrate important linkages between IDV, cross-cultural interactions and the shaping of global civic engagement values. This study is focused on the experiences and learning outcomes of Canadian RVs and not on the benefits or challenges of partner organizations and communities – a concern also identified by several survey respondents and the focus of related research (Lough and Tiessen 2018; Tiessen et al. 2018; Tiessen and Lough 2018; Larsen 2016). Rather, this research underscores how IDV can effectively educate RVs on the value of global engagement, building a stronger society comprising people who are actively engaged in prosocial activities that reinforce global civic engagement values. It thus suggests potential indirect benefit for partner countries in the Global South, particularly if the prosocial behaviours of the RVs result in advocacy for a stronger Canadian focus on international development and social justice priorities.

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