

“If You Have Come to Help Me, You Are Wasting Your Time”:  
Youth Volunteers in International Development Education  
Nate Stephens

Each summer as the doors of first-world institutions of higher learning are thrown open, thousands of idealistic high school and college-age students descend upon the third-world through myriad development education programs. Obviously students enroll in these programs for several reasons; some with hopes of improving the conditions of life in third-world countries, some wanting a life-changing experience, and even some looking only for a resumé-builder. While these reasons for participation are not necessarily bad, all of them hint at problems within the current models of third-world development and within youth-directed development in particular. Education programs spread the same affects of Westernization found in other development programs, namely first-world paternalism and universalization, but do so on a more dramatic scale. Thus many of the complaints against third-world development programs are exacerbated when the programs are enrolling large numbers of young participants, as in the case of development education programs.

Five recommended changes to the system could counteract the current trends in development education and lead to a more productive and sustainable method of education development. The first recommendation calls for a program focus on infrastructure development rather than direct teaching. This would create a more sustainable education system and allow developing countries to take control of their own development. The second recommendation encourages cultural exchange rather than “aid.” Through an integration of first and third world development programs, the current model of first world superiority could begin to erode away. The third requires a community development focus for education development programs. The fourth calls for increased qualification requirements so that the volunteers teaching in third-world

schools are actually prepared to do so. The fifth and last recommendation supports longer time commitments for volunteers, thereby encouraging program participation as a step along a career track while weeding out people who aren't serious about the program. Through the implementation of these changes international development education programs can better serve the people they aim to help while minimizing the harmful elements found in them now. If development education programs are treated responsibly they have the power to usher in a new era of mutual respect and reinforcement between the first and third worlds.

### **Development Education in Context**

*“If you are planning for a year, sow rice; if you are planning for a decade, plant trees; if you are planning for a lifetime, educate people”*  
*Chinese Proverb*

Since the end of World War II international development programs have been the major source of aid and modernization for developing countries. Development programs aid the developing world in several ways; by providing healthcare, teaching modern agriculture techniques, supporting environmental sustainability, and providing educational services. Among these areas of development, development education has become the most important and most widely supported facet of development. As demonstrated in the proverb shown above “a country which is unable to develop the skills and knowledge of its people and to utilize them effectively in the national economy will be unable to develop anything else” (Harbison quoted in Rwomire 3). Development education, when executed correctly, produces the infrastructure and human capital necessary to improve health care, human rights, industry, and all other sectors of life.

More than to any other area of development, youth volunteers have for the past century been drawn to the area of development education. This point is illustrated in the Peace Corps, the most established and arguably most demanding of all American international development

programs. 35% of Peace Corps volunteers serve in the area of education, by far the largest distribution of volunteers in any Peace Corps service area ([www.peacecorps.gov](http://www.peacecorps.gov)). When this statistic is compared with the median age of Peace Corps volunteers, 25, it is startling how much influence young people have in these programs.

### **Negative Implications of Youth Involvement in Development Education**

Because development education programs play such an important and influential role in development efforts, they must be carefully analyzed to insure that development education is filling its intended role in international affairs. Many of the problems posed by international development in general are particularly concentrated in development education because of its critical role. These problems include the threat of universalization and loss of indigenous culture caused by exposure to Western curricula and teaching practices. Some scholars and politicians go so far as to say that development education not only fails to improve the life outcomes of citizens of developing countries but also serves as “an instrument of imperialist domination and economic exploitation” (Rwomire 19).

Development education programs attract idealistic student volunteers because these programs often have less stringent qualification requirements. These students are also drawn to development education by its capacity for change and often because, after spending most of their lives in the education system, they feel experienced in the field and prepared to make a positive change. Because of their enthusiasm, energy, and commitment-free summers, student volunteers are also highly valued by the development programs.

Despite the benefits of youth participation, the current organization and structure of development education programs are inappropriate for youth participation and attitudes reflected in program policies are potentially harmful to developing nations. These attitudes are found in

the enrollment of under-qualified volunteers, misguided priorities of the volunteers, minimal time commitments, and little required follow-up.

The first problem with development education programs concerns the participation of under-qualified volunteers in important positions within the programs. If development education is truly as important as Harbison and others say it is, it seems inappropriate for high school and undergraduate students to be working in positions normally filled by more experienced adults. It seems presumptuous to assume that Western college students are equipped to teach in third-world countries. This assumption also reflects a first-world hubris in which the first-world values the abilities of Western college students over the experience of internal educators.

Development education programs also require minimal time requirements from their volunteers. While the Peace Corps requires an in-country stay of 27 months for its volunteers, many more programs only require volunteers to teach for a few weeks or months. It is almost impossible for a volunteer to understand their place in a development program in that little time, much less make a sustainable impact. Volunteers rarely participate in community development because “it requires a deeper understanding of the local culture and village politics than what the volunteers acquire in their brief training periods” (Eberly 26). By neglecting to coordinate development efforts with native customs and traditions development education programs spread universalization and aid in destroying local culture.

Because volunteers have so little time to establish themselves in their host communities while serving abroad, the target outcome of the program ends up centered on the experience of the Western students. While it is important for the volunteers to take something away from their time in the third-world so that they can be more aware in the future, “Peace Corps volunteers felt they learned about 50% more than they contributed” (Eberly 20). This statistic becomes

particularly alarming when considered in light of development education. If program teachers are learning more than the students they are teaching, something needs to change to balance the teacher/student relationship.

Finally, development education programs most heavily recruit students who are unsure about what to do with their future. Even the Peace Corps (the most respected development organization for many) asks potential volunteers, “Have a liberal arts degree and aren’t sure what to do with it?” ([www.peacecorps.gov](http://www.peacecorps.gov)) in its recruiting materials. Thus some of the least interested and potentially least capable students are drawn to development education through the message that international volunteering is only a part-time, in-between pastime. This once again demonstrates the belief that volunteering as a teacher in the developing world is an easy, minimal commitment, further reinforcing Western arrogance.

When considered in total, these critiques reflect a larger philosophical problem in how the developed West views the developing world. Even though the developed world has devoted a large portion of aid resources to education development, the manner of development outlined above shows that a larger problem of Western self-serving conceit persists despite the numerous development programs and Western volunteers. Obviously such an overarching and multifaceted problem requires a similarly overarching solution addressing each major alarming trend in development education.

### **The Future of Development Education**

*"If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."*

*Lilla Watson*

Although the problems surrounding youth participation in development education concern broad philosophical problems, namely the vanity and paternalism of development

programs, their solutions may not be as difficult to implement as one would initially suspect. The current system of development education could only need a few changes to bring about a paradigm shift in how the developed world views developing world.

The first major change needs to be a shift in focus toward actually training teachers and developing teacher colleges in the developing world. If the West is serious about developing education in the third world it has to devote more resources to making education sustainable. As Harbison said, education is the basis for all other development. If the education system is dependent upon temporary Western volunteers, the education system will be continually turning over and will never establish itself as a truly independent system of the developing world.

Along with the sustainability plan, development education programs need to increase the qualifications needed to volunteer abroad. This point supports sustainability in that, if the West truly wants to level the field between the first and third worlds, volunteers have to be reflective of our commitment to success. Trained education teachers should be encouraged to volunteer rather than recent high school or college graduates. This will help bring an end to the notion that the West is so far ahead of the developing world that they can send their children to volunteer.

Programs also need to support more community development programs and integrate first and third world development programs. Through shared leadership and an emphasis on community building education systems in the developing world can regain their autonomy and finally escape the shackles of colonialism. This change will also support programs based largely on cultural exchange rather than actually instruction of one part of the arrangement. Because the very idea of “aid” suggests superiority of the aid-givers over the aid-receivers, shifting development education programs into mutually supporting systems will promote equality between the first and third worlds.

Finally development education programs should require longer time commitments of their volunteers. Again, this change will lend credibility to the effort of education development and raise the standards for participation. The goal of this part of the changes is ultimately to create a system in which development education grows into a serious profession which attracts the most capable teachers and administrators.

### **Education for Civil Society**

Although youth participation in international development education carries many harmful side effects, the question of youth volunteers is merely reflective of more systemic problems. Youth volunteers themselves are not any more to blame than anyone else in the system, but their involvement inadvertently carries added consequences. If the proposed changes to development education are initiated, the youth will have to play a very important role. Youth volunteers have the idealism and energy necessary for several areas of service and as the next generation of leaders, innovators, and volunteers they should be prepared for world they will one day inherit. For now however their role has to be relegated to more appropriate areas of development and activism and away from teaching in development education programs.

If these steps are taken to eradicate Western imperialism in development education, the ultimate result will go far beyond education. A solid global education system will almost certainly serve as a spring board for continued development in other areas, including technology, healthcare, human rights, and environmentalism. Once third-world countries can support and sustain their own schools they will become more capable players in world politics and markets. Once third-world education opportunities catch up with those of the developed world, the line between first and third world will begin to blur altogether.

“Is Your Love in Vain?”

Bob Dylan

Do you love me, or are you just extending goodwill?  
Do you need me half as bad as you say, or are you just feeling guilt?  
I've been burned before and I know the score  
So you won't hear me complain.  
Will I be able to count on you  
Or is your love in vain?

Are you so fast that you cannot see that I must have solitude?  
When I am in the darkness, why do you intrude?  
Do you know my world, do you know my kind  
Or must I explain?  
Will you let me be myself  
Or is your love in vain?

Although Bob Dylan obviously isn't speaking directly about international development education programs, his message is still very powerful in this context. Spoken from the point of the view of the recipient of “goodwill,” the feelings of subjugation and dependence are all too clear. Dylan's tone reflects the uncertainty and mistrust one feels when a good-doers motives are unclear. This song instills the idea that in order to actually make a sustainable change in third-world education, the developed world has to recognize the independence and sovereignty of developing nations. This means showing enough respect to devote appropriate resources and personnel to the education development effort.

## Annotated Bibliography

Easterly, William. *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done so Much Ill and So Little Good*. New York: Penguin Press. 2006.

In his book, Easterly examines the hypocrisy behind development programs and international aid. He exposes the corruption in first-world aid efforts and proposes solutions to the problems facing the current disparities between the first and third worlds.

Eberly, Donald. "An International Perspective on Service-Learning." *Service Learning: Ninety-sixth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*. Ed. Joan Schine. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 1997.

Eberly's essay is very helpful in that it provides criticisms of international development education programs in the terms of service learning. Eberly describes the misplaced intentions of many program volunteers and the unequal benefits garnered from these programs as experienced by the volunteers and the intended recipients of aid.

Hallak, Jacques. *Investing in the Future: Setting Educational Priorities in the Developing World*. UNESCO: International Institute for Educational Planning. Paris: Pergamon Press. 1990.

This book is a helpful overview of the development education efforts occurring within developing countries. Hallak covers the history of development education and gives suggestions for the main problems he finds in current development education. The book doesn't really touch upon first-world involvement but I found it helpful to see what efforts the developing nations themselves are making.

Millar-Wood, Jayne. "Development Education in the United States: Development Education Paper No. 14." United Nations. UNICEF. 1981.

Millar-Wood discusses education of development issues in the United States. She criticizes the current ways that international volunteers share their experiences and promote knowledge of development issues upon their return from service.

Pinkau, Irene. *Service for Development: An Evaluation of Development Services and Their Cooperative Relationships*. Washington DC: Society for International Development. 1978.

Although compiled almost thirty years ago, Pinkau's evaluation of development programs was very helpful in understanding the inner-workings of development education. This volume also gives concrete examples of programs and gives information concerning their enrollment, required qualifications, and training duration. This evaluation was compiled at the request of the Kettering Foundation, UNESCO, the Peace Corps, and other international development agencies.

Rwomire, Apollo. "Education and Development: African Perspective." *Education and Development in Africa: A Contemporary Survey*. Ed. Nwomonoh, Jonathon. San Francisco: International Scholars Publications. 1998.

Rwomire addresses the current state of the education systems in Africa and outlines the development efforts currently being undertaken to improve them. This essay is particularly interesting because of how it identifies education as the main mechanism for upholding colonialism and imperialist domination.

Spaulding, Seth; John Singleton; Paul Watson. "The Context of International Development Education." *Review of Educational Research*, Vol. 38, No. 3, pp. 201-212. June, 1968.

This essay gives a comprehensive overview of the history of international development education and the methods of studying development. I found the section explaining the limited amount of quantitative data on the subject useful in understanding my research.

### Bibliography

Byne, Anne. "Australia's Programme of Educational Assistance to Developing Countries: The Place of Basic Education." *International Review of Education*, Vol. 40, No. 6, pp. 455-468. 1994.

Dylan, Bob. "Is Your Love in Vain?" *Street Legal*. Sony: 2003.

Hallak, Jacques. *Investing in the Future: Setting Educational Priorities in the Developing World*. Oxford, England: UNESCO: International Institute for Educational Planning. 1990.

McNeely, Connie. "Prescribing National Education Policies: The Role of International Organizations." *Comparative Education Review*, Vol. 39, No. 4pp. 483-507. Nov., 1995.

Scrase, Timothy ed. *Social Justice and Third World Education*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc. 1997

Spring, Joel. *Education and the Rise of the Global Economy*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc. 1998.

[www.peacecorps.gov](http://www.peacecorps.gov). Peace Corps. May 2, 2007.