

# GOOD INTENTIONS

Norms and Practices of Imperial Humanitarianism

The New Imperialism, Volume 4

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Front cover image: According to the official caption, this is US Navy Hospital Corpsman 2<sup>nd</sup> Class Porfirio Nino, from Maritime Civil Affairs Team 104, practices speaking Kinyarwanda, one of the official languages of Rwanda, during a civil observation mission in Bunyamanza, Rwanda, August 7, 2009. (DoD photo by Senior Chief Mass Communication Specialist Jon E. McMillan, US Navy. Public domain.) This particular photograph was also used as the lead image for 2011 presentation by AFRICOM titled, "United States Africa Command: The First Three Years". On the image the following words were superimposed: "Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngamantu' I am a person through other people. My humanity is tied to yours.~ Zulu proverb"

Back cover image: According to the official caption, these are US Airmen assigned to the 23<sup>rd</sup> Equipment Maintenance Squadron, 75<sup>th</sup> Aircraft Maintenance Unit "downloading" an A-10C Thunderbolt II aircraft during an operational readiness exercise at Moody Air Force Base, Georgia, August 4, 2009. (DoD photo by Airman 1<sup>st</sup> Class Joshua Green, US Air Force. Public domain.)

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## CHAPTER 3

# Who Needs Me Most? New Imperialist Ideologies in Youth-Centred Volunteer Abroad Programs



Tristan Biehn

**D**avid Harvey describes the new imperialism as the imposition of American neoliberal values and policies on other nations (Harvey, 2003). The new imperialist project is supported in part by narratives which aim to produce good neoliberal capitalist subjects both at home and abroad. One of the spaces in which this becomes evident is in the messages, both explicit and implicit, within student or youth-centred volunteer abroad programs. Examinations of the narratives produced by these programs in their recruitment efforts and mission statements reveal deeply ingrained and unquestioned neoliberal values and assumptions. Youth are encouraged to consider self-improvement and individual efforts as solutions to issues of global inequalities, rather than addressing political and economic systems and underlying relationships of exploitation and domination. The language used in these recruitment messages to youth enforces neoliberal, capitalist understandings of the problem of and potential solutions to global inequalities. Problems are thus decontextualized and depoliticized. The messages reinforce a desired image of the Western youth as a powerful actor, an impetus for change, and an inspiration to the

underprivileged, stagnant, victimized target populations elsewhere. Change is constructed as a concept which stands in for vague and unspecified promises. Through an examination of the messages conveyed by the websites of two key examples of youth-centred international volunteer organizations, I hope to show the neoliberal assumptions evident within these narratives and to illustrate the ways these narratives serve the new imperialism.

### **Cross Cultural Solutions: The Leading Authority on International Volunteering**

Cross Cultural Solutions (CCS) calls itself, “the leading authority on international volunteering,” boasting of nearly 20 years of experience (since 1995) and claiming to have, “virtually invented short-term international volunteering” and “set the standards of excellence in the field of international volunteering”. It is a US-based, non-profit organization, started by Steve Rosenthal in 1994 after his own positive experiences abroad, which he hoped to make available on a larger scale (Cross Cultural Solutions [CCS], 2014b). Projects are created by members of local communities, a system by which CCS attempts to address local needs and goals without “imposing outside ideas” (CCS, 2014b). CCS is serious about its transparency and responsibility to local people. It does try to encourage an attitude of respectful hard work and learning on the part of the volunteer. I chose CCS as one of my case studies because of its position as a respected organization which does avoid some of the obvious critiques of these types of projects, and as an organization which serves to demonstrate the flaws of even a thoughtful and well meaning approach to international volunteering.

### ***Depoliticizing Global Inequalities and the Effortlessness of Change***

On their homepage, detailing their organization's philosophy, CCS uses the word "change" 15 times in a 237 word message. Change is wished for by an unspecified mass of "people around the world" who "want change" in "inequities," "corrupt systems that prevent self-determination," and "unjust repression". According to their philosophy, "the change we all wish to see won't be realized through big, sweeping acts—not by governments, or armies, or the UN. Instead, lasting change will be achieved through small, personal acts of kindness and selflessness" (CCS, 2014c). They propose that it is this small change in people that CCS can bring about, and this change in volunteers will bring change to communities in a "ripple effect". The message ends with their motto: "Change their world. Change yours. THIS CHANGES EVERYTHING" (CCS, 2014c, capitalization in the original). Here, volunteers are cast as modest heroes, saving the world and bettering themselves at the same time. This philosophy is repeated throughout their site and those of other organizations, and seems to be the ideal picked up by journalists who wish to describe the *voluntourist* trend (the term "voluntourism" is commonly used to refer to the amalgamation of aspects of volunteering and tourism). Thus, I believe it is worthy of a great deal of unpacking.

The idea of change is used as a vague promise which is repeated frequently but is never tied down to any specifics. What is emphasized is its achievability. This makes it possible for potential volunteers to imagine change their own way and to simply insert their personal vision in the organization's broad philosophy. At the same time, this change is transformed into something each and every reader can actually carry out. Potential volunteers are also assured that only through changing themselves through the organization's program can they cause this change to happen for others (however they have imagined it). It is specifically asserted that change will not come about via

certain large-scale organizations, but only through personal achievement. This is particularly interesting, as it effectively shifts the burden of responsibility from governments and the UN to volunteers and the organizations that coordinate their efforts. It is important to note that it is not only this burden that is shifted, but that there is an accompanying shift in power and control over an area, from that area's (elected) government or local leadership to (unelected) NGOs (Baptista, 2012, p. 641). The dismissal of "big, sweeping acts" serves to guide readers away from political action and instead leads them to self-improvement and small-scale efforts. This is representative of a common and oft utilized neoliberal move, one which successfully quashes mass movements of resistance before they even form. Through this narrative, the energies of dissatisfied people are redirected to international volunteering.

### ***How CCS Promises Real Social Change and Immersion***

CCS' website has a specific section which targets high school students (ages 15-17). The high school volunteer recruitment page immediately mentions the favourable effect completion of their program would have on one's CV. The students are promised that just one trip will allow them to become more confident and adventurous, and to become better leaders with superior college resumes. Through the narratives present in these websites, prospective volunteers are reminded constantly of the direct, personal benefits that they will receive in exchange for their volunteer efforts. In this way, solutions to inequality and suffering are articulated as worth pursuing as part of a capitalist exchange: volunteer labour in return for marketable skills and better CVs. CCS outlines multiple locations which are available for volunteer opportunities, mostly describing places as safe, beautiful, warm, and welcoming. Teaching children English, doing crafts with them, organizing soccer matches, planting gardens and painting murals are listed as ways, "you'll be able to effect real social

change while being completely immersed in a new culture and welcoming community” (CCS, 2014a). English is presented as the key to gain access to global economy and to progress (Jakubiak, 2012, p. 442). Learning English is put forward as a way for the underprivileged members of local communities which host such programs to improve themselves and rise above and out of their local, rural communities, a narrative which reproduces images of an inferior periphery which successful, driven individuals abandon in search of opportunity in the centre (Jakubiak, 2012, pp. 445-446). The projects are nearly identical as described above no matter which location is viewed, casting into doubt the degree to which specific local issues are addressed. The messages go on to describe the “Home-Base” (“equipped with working fire extinguishers, first aid kits, and smoke detectors [and] providing all high school volunteers with personal lockers for valuables”) that the youth will live in during their stay, as well as the translators that will be on hand at all times (CCS, 2014a). This highlights the odd nature of the term “immersion” as found on these websites. According to these narratives, cultural immersion can occur while living segregated from the host communities, without the ability to speak the local language, with staff guiding a volunteer’s every movement. This conveys a questionable understanding of immersion as something which happens painlessly, easily, and simply by being in a place. Apparently, just “being there” is enough to legitimize and validate this experience.

The organization created a short video introducing prospective volunteers to their operations in Kilimanjaro, Tanzania, that includes statements made by staff members and volunteers about the program, all to entice the potential volunteer. One volunteer (18, American), talks about the instantaneous positive impact a volunteer has, “within minutes of walking in the door you can see the impact that you make on the kids, they love volunteers” (TV1Productions, 2013, 1:30). Another volunteer (22, American) admits that at first she thought she would teach the kids perfect English, but then realized, “the English

that I teach them is not as important as the love and attention that I can give" (TV1Productions, 2013, 1:55). The country director states that, "it is more of a matter of creating awareness...the moment they meet those people they are already making a difference...just by smiling to them, talking to them, these people feel recognized, feel appreciated" (TV1Productions, 2013, 3:07). Here we hear again that "making a difference" is instant, effortless, and requires nothing more than the presence of a Western volunteer. Later, the 18 year old we heard from earlier tells us about how safe the "home-base" is, while the video shows us a van pulling through the gates of an enclosed compound which are then closed by the uniformed house guards (TV1Productions, 2013, 5:15). This image serves to underline previously raised questions concerning the legitimacy of claims of immersion. The video is a painfully illuminating example of the problematic narratives being produced and distributed by these organizations.

### **International Student Volunteers, Inc.**

International Student Volunteers, Inc. (ISV) is a US-based, non-profit organization which boasts of being the world's highest-rated student volunteer program (according to the average rating given by over 30,000 student participants). ISV has over ten years of experience, has 32 members of the US Senate and Congress who serve on their Board of Reference (endorsing their global efforts), and has been named, "one of the Top Ten Volunteer Organizations by the US Center for Citizens Diplomacy in conjunction with the US State Department" (International Student Volunteers, Inc. [ISV], 2014d). ISV was founded in 2002 by Randy Sykes, growing from his wish to develop "a volunteer program to help address the tremendous needs around the world while providing an opportunity for young people to travel with a purpose; to give of themselves and contribute to something meaningful, educational and fun" (ISV,



2014a). I selected ISV as my second case study due to its internationally recognized, award-winning status.

### ***How ISV Practises Responsible Tourism***

ISV's website emphasizes its ties with local communities and "grassroots" organizations. It also claims to offer "the highest quality projects that are safe, meaningful, sustainable and achievable" which are formulated to appeal to students with an emphasis on "combining life-changing volunteer work with adrenaline filled adventure travel" (ISV, 2014d). In their description of "Responsible Tourism," ISV states that they, "aim to bring about positive economic, social, cultural and environmental impacts" (ISV, 2014b). What is meant, specifically, by such statements? While it is easy to dismiss such terms as mere buzzwords, it would be a mistake to do so. An examination of the ISV's use of these terms, and the messages surrounding them, serves to illustrate the problematic ideologies present in their projects, the ways they seek to create the expectations of an ideal student volunteer experience, as well as issues of expense and the manufactured need for international volunteers.

### ***Safety Concerns, Cost, and the Inexperienced Volunteer***

ISV addresses the issue of students' safety by listing various precautions taken by the organization on behalf of prospective volunteers. Their website describes the potential volunteer's position: "You'll be participating on [sic] tasks you may not be trained in, possibly in a foreign speaking country [sic], you may not have much international travel experience and therefore many questions about vaccinations and other safety concerns" (ISV, 2014c). This anticipates a volunteer's position as inexperienced and unprepared. One may wonder why inexperienced individuals would be shipped around the world to take part in various activities for which they are not properly trained. If an individual must be trained to take part, why

are locals not trained to work in their own communities? Why are Western youths flown across the globe, at great expense, to temporarily fill these positions? ISV goes to great lengths to address imagined safety concerns, listing support structures, supervision, and routine risk assessment and site inspections of supported local projects (ISV, 2014c). These support structures are another expense made necessary by the movement of western youth to these communities.

A standard four week “volunteer and adventure tour program” with ISV will cost nearly \$4,000. This amount varies (slightly) depending on program and country, and does not include airfare, half of one’s meals during the “adventure tour” portion, or the required travel insurance package. In the section entitled “What am I Paying For,” ISV provides a breakdown of where a volunteer’s money goes, in helpful bullet-point form. Administration, volunteer recruitment, volunteer support, volunteer management, volunteer supervision, meals and accommodation, transport, in-country support staff, connections between organizations, and finally the project itself are listed (ISV, 2014e). Most of these expenses, obviously, are only required because of the insistence on international volunteer labour. Since this is a significant amount of money, particularly for students, ISV suggests ideas for fund raising. A volunteer blog offers examples of how individuals, following ISV prescriptions, attempt to raise thousands of dollars for their trips abroad. A young Australian woman details her plans for “raising funds through a blog, and...planning on having a trash and treasure sale, movie night, pyjama party and exercising my creative writing skills to obtain exposure about my cause in my local news paper” (Katieannie09, 2014). There are many such descriptions of similar efforts, including an assortment of commercial enterprises such as selling chocolates and doughnuts. Friends and family are enlisted to contribute to these efforts, as well as strangers who can be reached through media outlets and the internet. All of this time, energy, and money (valuable commodities by any capital-

ist reckoning) go toward financing a student's vacation. Volunteering is presented as the "good" being done by the student in order to justify such expense. Donors are thanked for their "generosity" and updates on one's progress are provided via ISV's blog. How do these donors, and the volunteers themselves, come to see such efforts as necessary or beneficial?

This necessity is presented in the persuasive narratives of international volunteer organizations. ISV assumes the need of communities for foreign volunteers, stating (in reference to local NGOs), "these organizations rarely have the funding required to recruit and support international volunteers themselves. To help recruit international volunteers, many local NGOs partner with volunteer service organizations" (ISV, 2014e). They do not attempt to explain why international volunteering is a good way to address global inequalities. In fact, much effort is made to convince prospective participants that international volunteering is worth doing (as evidenced by the constant bombardment of the reader with messages of "making a difference" and "positive impact"). In a section explaining the difficulties of volunteering independently, ISV unintentionally highlights the problematic nature of this assumption, asserting that, "the difficult part is finding an organization you want to work for that meets your needs as a volunteer, will support you should something go wrong, and is willing to accept you as a volunteer" (ISV, 2014e). They note that local organizations may be seeking volunteers with specific skill sets, thus making many potential volunteers unwanted. However, if a volunteer joins an organization such as ISV, suddenly there is a plethora of need and want for their service. How then do such organizations respond to charges that they themselves create this need? Additionally, even if we uncritically accept the proposal that "underprivileged" communities must be helped to "develop," surely there are more efficient methods that can be imagined to achieve this.

## Producing Ideal Neoliberal Subjects

The organizations presented here, as well as the volunteers who take part in their programs, may well be sincere in their hopes for change and their wishes to help. The sentiment, although vague, is laudable. I do not seek to vilify those who make an effort to ease the suffering of others. However, as the above narratives have demonstrated, volunteer abroad organizations propagate and reinforce new imperialist ideologies. Youth centred volunteer abroad programs are part of a process of indoctrination wherein young people and members of target communities are recruited as ideal neoliberal capitalist subjects. The hope that mutual understanding and respect, along with individual efforts, can “make an impact” on inequality and suffering around the globe is a neoliberal narrative which obfuscates the complex causes of inequalities. Policies (such as those instituted by the IMF) which undermine the abilities of states to support their own health care and education systems are not a result of misunderstanding. Voluntourism aims to recast consumers as the solution to issues of global inequality, instead of the problem (Baptista, 2012, p. 639). The volunteers produced by these narratives are encouraged to believe that it is reasonable that changing the world should be an effortless and fun process. The prospective volunteers are trained to help others with the promise of reward in the forms of self improvement, more appealing resumes, and self satisfaction. This is problematic, in part, because real, viable solutions toward solving global inequalities will probably not benefit over privileged westerners. Prospective youth volunteers, having been fed narratives which assure them that their mere presence, smiles, and energy are all that is needed to change the world, do not seem likely to take steps to seriously address poverty and oppression. Meanwhile, they have been assured that spending money and individual efforts are the best way to positively influence their world. In the world under the new imperialism, even the wish to

help initiate change and alleviate suffering is commodified and harnessed to suit US neoliberal capitalist goals.

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