

V VOLUNTEERISM: NAIVE PARTICIPATION AND CHEAP
AID¹

by Christopher Brown²

The spirit of volunteerism, based on the unquestioned assumption that western middle class youth³ can be bearers of peace and help enlighten the uneducated and develop the poor people of Africa, Asia and Latin America, is the secular equivalent in the twentieth century to the western missionary endeavour in previous centuries. It represents the same concept of the white man's burden. Missionary activity in the past is generally criticized by volunteers because of the fundamental dichotomy between missionaries bringing "civilization" to "primitive" people, while at the same time the imperial powers were

¹ I wish to acknowledge debt to Scott Carters' lengthy article, "Are Expatriates Necessary", East Africa Journal, June 1969, from which much of the research for the first section of this paper derives. I am also grateful for the exchange of ideas with former CUSO staff associates. The ideas presented are, however, my own.

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³ Over 90% of export volunteers are from Northern European and North American countries. Figures quoted are from DAC questionnaires for 1968, except where otherwise indicated.

exploiting these societies through colonial government and commercial-industrial enterprise. Nevertheless, idealistic volunteers seldom see the implications of their being used to influence thinking and therefore to manipulate the societies in which they "serve". Through their participation in the education process - which absorbs 50-75% of volunteers - the volunteers believe they are enhancing economic and social development. At the same time, however, foreign investment, trade arrangements, military alliances, and international public debt are making under-developed nations more dependent upon western countries.

The Universal Charter of Volunteer Service, published by the Co-ordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service (COCO), a subsidiary agency of UNESCO, voices the ideals subscribed to in western circles. It describes the volunteer as a pragmatic idealist "without material or chauvinistic motivation", with a "strong desire to serve", stimulating "communal awareness, social responsibility, self-awareness, and self-reliance" all in accord with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.¹ And yet, the recent moves by International Secretariat for Voluntary Service ISVS and COCO to internationalize volunteer work under UN auspices have not been widely supported by the individual agencies, although they were by western nations at the United Nations. For in the final resort the latter are really concerned with national security and international stability. President Kennedy's words in 1960 to the first group of young people to go out with Peace Corps underline concern for national security and international stability which has been present from the start:

¹ Published by COCO, UNESCO, Paris.

"How many of you are willing to spend two years in Africa or Latin America or Asia working for the U.S. and working for freedom? ... On your willingness to do that, on your willingness to contribute part of your life to this country, I think will depend the answer whether we as a free country, can compete. I think we can, and I think Americans are willing to contribute but the effort must be far greater than we have made in the past.¹

Programmes comparable to the Peace Corps exist in Britain, Canada, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Switzerland, Australia and Japan. There is a marked difference, however, in the way in which the programmes are financed and organized. The Dutch, Australian, British and Canadian programmes are privately run, supported by a combination of public and private funds. The American, Japanese, Norwegian, Swedish and Swiss programmes are Government run and financed; the West German and Danish programmes are privately run but wholly supported by Government funds. The privately run organizations undoubtedly have more control over policy than Government run agencies. Support by public finance of private organizations does, however, present constraints on the freedom of action.

The volunteer operations differ in other respects. Canadian University Service Overseas (CUSO) with 1,338 personnel has dropped any

¹ John F. Kennedy, Speech delivered on October 14 1960, University of Michigan cited in Jules Pageno "Education in the Peace Corps", Notes and Essays on Education for Adults", Boston University, 1965.

reference to the term volunteer in favour of a more neutral term "co-operant", believing this to be less insulting to host countries. CUSO has stressed host country involvement placing personnel under direct employment and control of the recipient governments. Usually individuals are employed in established posts in the civil service, and receive close to the local salary for the post held. But a fairly rapid turnover of staff within CUSO may reflect internal criticism of the organization's premises. Many seem to be increasingly aware of the rapidly shrinking relevance of western middle class non-socialist youth working in cross-cultural settings where self-reliance through local initiatives should be creating the genuine basis for significant development. Hence the emphasis in CUSO recruitment has in recent years been placed on competence to do a job, while ideas related to 'service', participation in social change, and 'virtue in poverty' have all been toned down. This approach is both practical and necessary if youth is going to make any contribution to development.

The British Volunteer Programme (BVP), totalling 1,787 volunteers abroad in 1968 is divided horizontally among four recruiting agencies: Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), International Voluntary Service (IVS), United Nations Association (UNA), and the Catholic Institute for International Relations (CIIR). BVP co-ordinates and formulates policy. Field administration of the VSO programme, the largest of the four, is in the hands of the British Council, where a large role is played by ex-colonial civil servants. In contrast to the Canadian programme, little change appears to be on the horizon among British volunteer agencies. The BVP conference held April 1969 to review policy and determine manpower requirements through the seventies

failed to come to grips with any of the issues which might raise doubts concerning hitherto unquestioned assumptions. Doubts should have arisen particularly about the right of British volunteer participation in the backyard of underdeveloped nations, while pressing problems of inequality regarding ethnic minorities remain unsolved in Britain's own society.

The Peace Corps, totalling 17,396 in 1968, is larger than all other volunteer operations put together. In some countries up to 50% of the secondary school teaching staff have been manned by the Peace Corps. The breakdown of field of work in Africa in 1968 was 67% in Education, 13% in Community Development, 10% in Health, and 5% in Agriculture. The request for the Peace Corps to withdraw volunteers from community development projects in various countries points to the concern of host governments with intrusion by foreigners at the grass roots level. One can predict the similar curtailment in the activities of other volunteer agencies which are at present less noticeable because of smaller numbers, and often politically less unacceptable than a large American presence.

An increasing credibility gap has plagued the Peace Corps ever since Nkrumah's accusation of infiltration by the CIA and links with other State Department agencies.¹ This has subsequently been given credence by William Attwood, ex-US ambassador to Guinea and Kenya. In his

¹ Kwame Nkrumah, Neo-Colonialism the Last Stage of Imperialism, London, Thomas Nelson Printers, 1965, p. 249. See Scott Carter, 1969, *ibid*, p. 25-26 for much fuller exposition of these links.

book The Reds and The Blacks Attwood admits that the Peace Corps Country Director worked closely with the Agency for International Development (AID), the United States Information Service (USIS), and the CIA, exchanging information and co-ordinating action for long range planning.¹

While Americans are exporting volunteers little happens to resolve the racial inequalities in their own society - American Blacks, Mexican labourers, Eskimos, Indians, or Puerto Ricans. This, together with opposition to US policy in Vietnam, has contributed to making the Peace Corps unacceptable to not a few countries. Given the identification of most western countries with American military actions - few have condemned it officially in public foreign policy statements - there is no doubt that white westerners are widely viewed as accomplices of the United States, a fact which reflects back upon the welcome given to western volunteers.

M. Ivan Illich has called for the total withdrawal of volunteers from Latin America. He regards the movement as a "benevolent invasion", seducing the "underdeveloped" to the "benefits of world affluence and achievement" in American struggle for survival.

"I do have a great faith in the enormous goodwill of the U.S. volunteer. However his faith can usually be explained only by an abnormal lack of intuitive delicacy. By definition you cannot help being

¹ William Attwood, The Reds and The Blacks, London, Hutchinson & Co., 1967, p. 179.

vacationing salesmen for the American way of life since by definition that is the only way of life you know".¹

This is the way in which the inhabitants of Latin America increasingly view the good intentions of western youth participation in their societies. It amounts to a naive participation which is not merely intrusion but culturally humiliating.

Regis Debray is critical of the volunteer as another form of western participation designed to coerce and control - pre-empting the prospect of radical revolutionary restructuring of society by internal forces.

"As for North American imperialism it has increased its forces in the field and is making every effort to present itself, not in repulsive guise but in the shape of social and technical assistance. We are familiar with the sociological projects now under way, staffed with international personnel under an academic cover whose assignment is to "photograph" the social, economic, and individual situations of each family in the "danger areas"... Thousands of Peace Corps men have succeeded in integrating themselves in the rural areas ... Even the most remote regions are today teaming with Catholic, Evangelical, Methodist, and Seventh Day Adventist missionaries. In a word all these close unit networks of control strengthen the national machinery of domination".²

¹ Ivan Illich talk delivered to the Conference on Inter-American Student Projects (CIASP) Cuernavaca, Mexico, April 20th, 1968.

² Regis Debray Revolution in the Revolution? Penguin Books, 1967, p. 52.

One can deduce from these kinds of warning that volunteerism per se has not impressed liberated thinking in the third world. It may well not be tolerated much longer. The choice is to modify the attitudes of western youth to a less romanticized and less insulting view of their role, or to get kicked out - which may well happen, and no doubt should, anyway.

Volunteer enterprises have expanded to 25,000 in 1968, representing a quarter of the technical assistance component of aid which has in turn been growing at 10% p.a during the sixties. Volunteers are not generally preferred by recipients to the technical assistance personnel that are received under bilateral or international arrangements, but are accepted to assist in meeting local middle-level manpower shortages in view of the inadequacy of the supply of the former. There are, of course, obvious advantages in receiving volunteers, especially as regards the placement of youth more willing to accept postings in remoter parts of the countryside than is the expatriate officer with a family. But on cost criteria the volunteer programmes make marginal if any difference to recipients. Very nearly equal administrative support, medical service, housing etc. has to be provided to volunteers as that afforded expatriate officers in the civil service, or to technical assistance experts. The image of volunteerism in the west is of idealistic youths venturing forth to live in grass huts receiving a nominal stipend or pocket money for their service. The reality, in much of Africa at least, is quite different. The volunteer often receives the local salary for the post he holds. Thus the burden placed on the recipient government is similar to that which applies to contract expatriates, and it is greater than that related to the technical assistance expert whose salary is paid by his own government.

In the case of the American Peace Corps, the West German volunteers, and those from the Scandinavian countries which pay the salaries or living expenses of their volunteers the direct costs of volunteers to the recipients diminish. Simultaneously, however, the host country control over the projects on which they are engaged diminishes as well. In 1968 the economic support provided by the Tanzanian Government for the Canadian programme of 100 personnel, including salaries, and the difference between the economic and sub-economic rent charged on housing, was estimated to be \$200,000 (CAN). This would be similar for BVP who receive equivalent salaries and housing from the Tanzanian Government. Therefore, for a poor country like Tanzania 'volunteer aid', like most 'aid', is expensive. Salaries of 'volunteer' teachers are close to being on a par with the nationals in the teaching service. The point here is not that the Tanzanian Government objects to paying a proper salary to teachers but first, that these teachers are more expensive to Tanzania than for instance Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) teachers whose salaries are paid by the Canadian Government, and second, that it is nonsense to talk about volunteering when the salaries received are very good by Tanzanian standards.

Turning to the donor, the economic cost of volunteer programmes over technical assistance personnel represents a considerable saving even where the donor pays volunteer salaries. The 18,654 Peace Corps volunteers abroad in 1967 cost the American Government \$108m as compared to \$203m for the 11,123 U.S. advisors and experts.¹ Therefore, it is obviously advantageous to the donor to maintain a middle level volunteer work force rather than a high level force of experts.

¹ L.B. Pearson (Chairman), Partners in Development, Praeger, New York and Pall Mall, London, 1969.

Another economic factor to consider is that the young graduate is not likely to be a fully productive factor on initial entry into the labour force at home. Given adjustments to a cross-cultural setting - climate, local bureaucracy, etc. - much of his interest and energy is absorbed. If it is his first job he is learning to work (apply his profession or skills as opposed to study them) at the expense of the recipient. Even where intensive professional training and orientation are given - as Peace Corps does for B.A. generalists to equip them with a skill - there is the adjustment factor.

Finally in terms of motivation the choice is often between competing for unattractive jobs in the domestic environment or post graduate studies. It is not surprising that escape - often to postpone decision or sort out personal hangups - is an attractive alternative. The years that employment opportunities are tight in Canada, are the years when applications for overseas work are highest: a tempting outlet to alleviate surplus outflow from colleges. In fact, however, the Canadian programme is turning back many graduates who are not sufficiently qualified professionally or have not enough working experience to meet the increasingly high standards demanded by manpower requirements in many countries. No comparable restraints seem to be operating on VSO.

A few conclusions emerge. First, the host country criteria for expatriates including volunteers will increasingly be related to specific manpower needs, and competence, not 'love and poverty', will be the yardstick of acceptance and credibility. Second, volunteering is actually for the benefit of the donor - a saving on aid - not only for the recipient. Third, as an ethos, it is insulting to local initiative and better left at home - where few western societies have even begun to resolve

pluralistic tensions. Since the West has chosen to support stability and define the limits and direction of social change, armies of volunteers to Africa and elsewhere are not going to confuse Africans, Asians, or Latin Americans as to where western commitments lie. Nor will the ethos be an acceptable cathartic release to absolve present-day western youth from the albatross of guilt knowing as they will that their mother countries were the accomplices in the sell out of black Africa to white suprematist coercion. If western nations cannot extract themselves from the dilemma they certainly must not cause further offence by exporting good will. Practical 'co-operants' skills are as much as can be tolerated.