Who's Really Winning?: A Reflection on International Service Learning

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This reflection has been almost two years in the making, as I've grappled with what it means to be a participant, a facilitator, and, most recently, a community-based researcher of service learning. In summer 2014, I participated in an international service-learning trip to South Africa's rural Western Cape through Northwestern University. For eight weeks, I learned about the community where I was staying–its assets and its challenges–and recruited a group of passionate and engaged community members. By working with the group, my team of fellow students and I worked to address poverty by reopening and expanding a community garden. As we were leaving, the community showered us with praise and thanksgiving–we had been the catalyst necessary to organize and jumpstart their existing potential! I left that summer inspired and humbled by the power of international service learning.

But just as quick as our sense of accomplishment had come, our tangible effect on the community was gone. The project failed. Within months, the group of community members had stopped gardening and returned to fishing for income. Farming, they said, required too much effort and took months to see a profit, whereas fishing put money in their pockets the same day. I was confused after my trip to South Africa. I wondered if service learning was even beneficial, or if I had been a volunteer tourist who took more from a community than I had left behind.

It was from this place of questioning that I traveled to Uganda the following summer and immersed myself in the same service-learning program once again, this time as a Community-Based Research Fellow for Northwestern's Buffett Institute for Global Studies. As a fellow, I was an extra resource for the local site team in Uganda that coordinated homestays, partner organizations, and development projects for the students. Half of my time was spent as a member of the site team, facilitating the program, and the other half was spent as a participatory-researcher. This split-role gave me a unique perspective of the process. Some days I would interview community members who had participated in projects years prior, while other days I would vet partner organizations for future students.

At times I felt like a hypocrite, the embodiment of everything I believed was wrong with service learning. For example, I had never been to Uganda before and did not know the local language. Even though I was familiar with the program's structure from my time in South Africa, how was I supposed to record observations and make recommendations for improvement when I was far from being an expert on community development in Uganda?

My first few weeks as a fellow were a whirlwind immersion of getting to know the community and coming to the realization that one never *really* figures it all out. Rather, I learned to become comfortable being uncomfortable; I relied more on others and less on myself. Part of this process was shifting the way I thought about my role as a researcher. Instead of seeing myself as an outsider in Uganda with more knowledge or a different perspective, I came to see myself as just someone with a platform to tell other people's stories. In this way, I would approach interviews with organizations and community members as an opportunity to share their voices to a wider audience: "What do you wish you could have said to the students those many years ago?" In no time at all, interviews felt less agenda-driven and more personal. I've never laughed more than I did one afternoon in the back of a truck in a sugarcane field when my interviewee felt comfortable enough to give me dating advice!

In the process of going from a service-learning participant to a community-based researcher, I began to see parallels that I previously had not considered. In South Africa, for example, I tried to apply Western thought and business principles to rural community farming. I left that project feeling hopeful because I knew that in the United States a similar project would likely succeed. But just as in research, development isn't one-size-fits-all. I had to learn how I fit into the larger picture of research and service learning.

As a researcher and developer, I shared information, asked questions, and shed light on previously unconsidered topics, but my involvement stopped there in both realms. My suggestions for improvement are other people's ideas that have been collected and published by me, but it's ultimately up to the organizations and communities to implement change. Sustainable development, I've come to believe, isn't quick or easy, but it's more likely achieved when done from the bottom-up and by those who know the community and environment best.

I experienced many disappointments while learning about sustainable development. But for every challenging conversation or piece of conflicting advice, there were moments that restored my faith in service learning. One woman, who insisted I call her "Granny," told me how she had put three of her grandchildren through school from the consistent income she had earned through a 2009 mushroom growing project. And by week four in Uganda, I had lost count of all the avocadoes, ears of corn, and sugarcane stalks I had been given as gifts. I gained a sense of humility and an appreciation for life that might only come from the infectious love that I felt from my homestay parents, the local site team, and the communities. It wasn't an "I'm thankful that I have running water" feeling like I had after returning from South Africa, but rather the kind one gets when he meets someone genuinely happy and wonders, "What secret does he know that I don't?"

I went to Uganda hoping to learn how service learning could be done more sustainably, and I came away feeling like I had learned more about myself than anything else in the process. The people I met became my friends and my role models, and I only hope that I was able to give them just as much as they gave me.

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