Volunteering

Letters and Comment

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Here's some shocking news: foreign aid can work. The images flicker out from the nightly news: footage of famine and war, shots of disaster and sorrow. The stories we usually see about the developing world can make you reach for the remote.

But each year thousands of Canadian volunteers turn off the TV and go see for themselves. What they see isn't a reality show, its reality. It's a more complex, sad yet hopeful picture than you could ever appreciate from a 30-second clip. These Canadians are witnessing firsthand the news that doesn't make it to air. And while this may come as a shock, sometimes the news is good.

There is a lot of criticism about foreign aid these days. And admittedly, there are far too many examples of failed development assistance. Zambian economist Dambisa Moyo's book Dead Aid is just the latest to cause waves in global waters. To say that foreign aid can be bad is not controversial. But to say that all aid is dead risks throwing the baby out with the bathwater, along with malarial drugs, microcredit projects, schooling for girls, and sustainable farming techniques.

Canada's volunteer-cooperation agencies know firsthand that overseas volunteers are leveraging both our country's development assistance and their own skills and experience to bring lasting, sustainable change.

Celebrating another UN day - in this case the International Day of the Volunteer - might seem trite in the face of foreign aid critiques, but we know that in every corner of the developing world, committed citizens with few resources are facing down extreme poverty and striving to build better futures. And in many communities, Canadian volunteers are working shoulder-to-shoulder with these people to make positive change happen.

Volunteers like Bob Sutton, who served in Honduras as a natural resource management advisor with the Atlantida Model Forest. He helped community stakeholders develop a common plan for environmental conservation and sustainable jobs.

And volunteers like Clemence Tatin-Jaleran, who made her living measuring risk factors of Canadians as an actuary with an insurance company, until she took a risk herself and volunteered in Bolivia. She worked with local organizations to pilot a micro-insurance program that would protect poor rural farmers and small producers in the event of natural disasters, hospitalization or death.

Or volunteers like Jasminder Virdee, who volunteered in Mongolia with a local NGO that provides training for women and helps them get involved in community development. She helped improve volunteer management and the ability of the organization to help women at the grassroots.

These are just three of the more than 75,000 Canadians who have volunteered abroad since the early 1960s. Today, around 3,000 Canadians volunteer overseas each year through one of the eight member organizations of Canada's volunteer cooperation program. Some serve for a few weeks, while some volunteer for years. What they have in common is the belief that each person can make positive change, and the commitment to make that belief a reality.

At one time, the majority of Canadian volunteers were youth and recent college graduates, but these days more and more of the people who donate their time are experienced and skilled professionals.

The original impetus for many volunteer-sending agencies was the notion of filling the skills gap in newly emerging societies. As countries in the developing world gained their political independence, they needed to build up their infrastructure, especially in health and education. International volunteers were a valuable resource in those early years.

Over time, the needs of Southern communities changed. While developing countries no longer need or want great numbers of unskilled volunteers from places like Canada, there is still demand for specialized technical and professional skills, and for international collaboration on global issues.

Volunteers work on long-term, sustainable solutions. They help build the social infrastructure - the individual skills and institutional capacity - that is so critical to a nation's future. And since volunteers generally work on programs designed in the developing world - not projects parachuted in from outside a nation's borders - the benefits of their work continue to be felt by local people long after the volunteers have passed on their expertise and returned home.

Volunteering is a chance to use individual skills to make a contribution to fighting poverty. Working alongside women and men in developing communities, volunteers see first-hand the kind of impact that international service can have in improving people's lives.

And volunteers return to their own country with invaluable professional experience, a wealth of memories, and a broader perspective on the world. They develop international and cross-cultural understanding essential for success in a globalized world. Once back home, these returned volunteers are often very active in their communities; research has found that they volunteer significantly more than the average Canadian.

From decades of experience, we know that Canadian volunteers contribute to poverty reduction. This may be a shocking truth, but sometimes development assistance does indeed work.

And that's some good news worth watching.

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