Avoiding the Sapling and the Elephant: A Case-Study from Uganda of the Impact of Short-Term Teams on Participants and Host Communities

Abstract

Short-term teams are a growing phenomenon that are gaining increasing attention, with some arguing such trips can create empowered citizens devoted to social justice, but there has also been increasing scrutiny on the impact of such trips on host communities, with questions arising over whether more harm is done than good. This research serves to contribute to this debate, by considering a case-study of a short-term team from Ireland which travelled to Uganda, and examining the impact on participants and host community.

It is found that the team is viewed in a positive light by the host community, and with many criticisms of short-term teams not emerging as strongly as the literature suggests, it is postulated this is due to the team characteristics, which could serve as potential guidelines for best practice for other organisations sending short-term teams. Furthermore, recommendations are suggested so implementation can be improved further.

However, it is suggested that the negative impacts of short-term teams are too potentially grievous to justify their unchecked proliferation, and that organisations should strongly reconsider sending teams unless they can ensure they are occurring within specific parameters such as those suggested within this research.

1. Introduction

"Sometimes, that is what it is like to do mission with you Americans," the African storyteller commented. *"It is like dancing with an elephant.""* – Adeney (2000, p.1)

The effectiveness and beneficence of short-term teams (STTs) have been increasingly called into question in recent years, with a barrage of criticism directed their way (Priest and Priest, 2008; Mohamad, 2013; Sin et al., 2015). The above quote distils one of these criticisms into a pithy statement, namely the fear of the host community getting 'trampled' by the actions of the STT.

However, these criticisms have not halted their proliferation. Even if we consider only religious-based teams, there has been phenomenal growth, with an estimated 120,000 participants in 1989, 1 million in 2003 and 2.2 million in 2006 (Corbett and Fikkert, 2009). This growth is remarkable.

In light of this it is surprising that facets of the STT phenomenon are relatively unexamined. While a substantial volume of material exists on the impact of STTs on participants, there is a comparative dearth of studies looking at the impact on host communities. It is into this lack that this paper endeavours to speak, by examining a case-study of an Irish STT working in a Ugandan community. It is only by scrutinising such case-studies that we can begin to assess if STTs are beneficial or harmful.

2. Definitions

The reason STTs have been comparatively unexamined to date is perhaps because they are often subsumed under the umbrella of volunteer tourism (VT), classically defined by Wearing (2001) as:

"Those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organised way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society or environment." (p.1)

VT has become one of the fastest-growing niche tourism markets in the world, with the number of recorded VT organisations rising from 75 in 1987 to 1300 in 2010 (Brown, 2005; Wright, 2013). Brown (2005) estimates 63.8 million individuals from the USA alone volunteered in 2002-03.

However, the phenomenon of VT encompasses a wide spectrum of activities, with Brown (ibid.) distinguishing between volunteer-minded trips, where the volunteering takes precedence, and vacation-minded trips where volunteering is a small part of the trip. While falling under the VT umbrella, STTs are a particular subset of VT.

Carlson (2012) has defined a STT as a group engaged in a period of full-time volunteering in a setting away from the participants' home. Trips tend to be 1-4 weeks long (Klaver, 2015) with Corbett and Fikkert (2009) suggesting in their analysis of religious-focused teams that 50% go on trips of two weeks or less.

While Carlson's definition could be applied to teams working within their own country, we will focus on teams from the Global North travelling to work within communities in the Global South, and will apply the time parameters outlined above, examining the time-range most teams fall within – trips of less than one month.

3. Research Design

3.1 Overview

A two-week trip of a small Irish NGO to Kahara in Uganda in July 2016 was identified to analyse the impact of a STT due to its specific characteristics:

-       Several young people on the team had never been in the Global South before, providing a sample group to gauge the trip's impact on participants.

-   Several individuals on the team had been to Kahara multiple times, allowing an investigation into why they returned.

-   The STT worked with active community-led groups which would be useful to question on the STT's impact.

-   The organisation had been active in Kahara for five years, with STTs visiting regularly during this period. This would allow the host community to effectively gauge their impact.

3.2 Context

The NGO aims to support communities within the Global South through capacity building and improving health and education. In Kahara they have partnered with a local NGO to support a primary school and have worked alongside community leaders in judging the most effective interventions. Support is continuous, with contact via Skype with local partners, and a STT travels annually to Kahara to support the work.

The STT in this case-study consisted of Irish NGO representatives, participants from previous teams and young people travelling to Uganda for the first time, including ten pupils from an Irish secondary school. Within the team were medical practitioners, teachers and sports coaches.

Basic training was given before travelling, with a series of three training evenings, with a focus on expectations of the participants and cultural awareness. Within this training programme, motivations of the participants were problematised and challenged by those leading the discussions, with some of the criticisms of STTs raised such as the perceived dangers of creating dependency.

Whilst there the team carried out:

➢ Educational programmes

➢ Public health programmes, with a focus on malaria, HIV/AIDS, 'jiggers' prevention and antenatal care

➢ 'Kid's Club' programme with a Christian message shared through drama and song

➢ Sports programmes, most of which were led by qualified coaches

➢ Home visits with participants sharing food and fellowship with the host community

3.3 Methodology

There were two areas to analyse:

1) The impact on the STT participants

2) The impact on the host community

There needed to be a rigorous methodology that would effectively gather information from appropriate stakeholders within the STT and host community.

It was judged that the most effective method was to identify representative focus-groups, ask key questions and analyse their responses. Focus-groups have the advantage of allowing data from a wide range of individuals to be collected and provides an opportunity for clarification, lessening the chance of misunderstanding.

Prior to the fieldwork, an extensive literature review was carried out to establish the parameters of the debate and where consensus and contestation lay. This research was used to formulate open-ended questions which were designed to allow focus-groups to respond as thoroughly and exhaustively as possible to secure rigorous data for analysis, with multiple voices encouraged to respond to each question and dissenting viewpoints encouraged. The focus-group conversations were recorded, transcribed and analysed.

The Irish focus-groups were facilitated by myself, where I asked questions and recorded responses. However, the Ugandan focus-groups presented a challenge, as I was concerned my presence in Uganda could compromise the data, especially considering the topic under examination. To minimise this risk, I chose to be absent for the focus-groups, to allow the host communities to be freer in sharing their views. Instead, a key Ugandan contact facilitated the focus-groups and sent the audio-files to me. Having worked with this contact before, I knew they were highly respected within the community. I had observed their interactions in community settings before, and knew they invited robust debate when chairing discussions. While acknowledging the possibility of their presence influencing the data, I feel this risk is negligible.

As previously stated, there was a pre-existing community-led group in Kahara consisting of school, church and community leaders which directed the development work within the area, and with which the NGO worked closely, as well as a pre-existing managing committee of a secondary school. Having observed previous meetings of these groups, I knew they were a place where robust dialogue occurred, with opportunities for dissenting voices to be heard. The existence of such groups provided ideal focus-groups to discuss the interactions of STTs with the host communities of which these groups were a part. For the other Ugandan focus-groups, a similar structure was followed as much as possible.

The focus-groups were carried out in casual settings[1] to set individuals at ease and encourage dialogue. Questions were translated into local languages if it was useful. Aside from this, each focus-group was carried out in as similar conditions as possible to ensure consistency.

With all the conversations recorded and transcribed, the frequency of a response was noted when possible to highlight whether it was a common response or an anomalous

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[1] e.g. cafes in Ireland or community halls in Uganda

dissenting voice, although it should be noted that there was no formal numerical data taken on how many focus-group participants may have agreed with a given statement without verbally stating their agreement.

Great care was taken in choosing focus-groups to ensure they were as representative of the STT participants and host community as possible. The make-up of the focus-groups were as follows:

Participants on STT

Three focus-groups were chosen:

➢ The school team, all of whom were 17-18 years-old at the time of the trip (Group A)

➢ Other team-members, some of whom had travelled to Kahara a number of times (Group B)

➢ NGO leaders and organisers of the STT (Group C)

Participants from the host community

To gauge the impact on the host community, a representative cross-section of community stakeholders was gathered:

➢ The Kahara community leadership group, consisting of school, church and community leaders who direct educational and medical development within the community, and with whom the Irish NGO closely work with in their developmental interventions and who they liaised with to plan the work of this STT (Group D)

➢ Parents of Kahara Primary School pupils (Group E)

➢ Teachers and management of Destiny High School, where past-pupils of Kahara attended (Group F)

➢ Former Kahara Primary School pupils now attending Destiny High School (Group G)

➢ Members of a local NGO working in Kahara throughout the year (Group H)

4. Findings

4.1 Impact on STT participants

"Working in an underdeveloped region should result in meaningful change and an expansion of one's worldview, not a new profile picture." – Wesby (2015)

There is a relative sparsity of literature on STTs as defined previously, with much of the literature focused on the more general phenomenon of VT. However, much of the VT

discussion will be relevant, based on the assumption that as a subset of the VT phenomenon, the same observations will apply.

4.1a Literature Review

<u>Positives</u>

Researchers have argued that STTs can have a positive impact on participants by allowing them to observe the consequences of injustice up close, offering a broader perspective which leads to personal transformation and inspiring opposition to injustice (Guttentag, 2011). Such experiences are reasoned to awaken a recognition of complicity in injustice within transnational hierarchies, leading to a commitment to challenge such hierarchies (Griffiths, 2014).

In this argument, it is not only the outcome for the host communities that is important, but also the outcome for participants. Conran (2011) argues the experience can challenge individuals to refocus their lives, become more politically engaged and live more ethically. Others argue STTs should spur participants to campaign for change in their home countries in areas such as foreign policy, helping mould the conscience of the Global North and allowing resource-rich churches to collaborate with those in the Global South facing resource limitations (Priest et al., 2006).

Indeed, Chris Brown of Teaching Projects Abroad goes so far as speculating that lack of experience in the Global South by businesspeople and bankers contributes to exploitive relationships, saying, *"How much better it might have been if all the people who are middle and high management of Shell had spent some time in West Africa… how differently they would have treated the lbo people in Nigeria?"* (cited by Simpson, 2004b, p.190).

While these arguments are powerful, their veracity is difficult to measure in practice. Scholars have attempted to assess this by measuring if there was a notable change in participants' involvement in social movements post-trip, and there does appear to be evidence of such transformations. For example, Beyerlein et al. (2011) found individuals returning from a STT tended to have higher participation in political activity, volunteering and in charitable giving. Farrell (2013) presents a specific Peruvian case-study, where after an STT witnessed lead-poisoning in children due to practices of a transnational company, some became involved in social movements against the company. Others claimed to have changed careers to law, social work or church work due to their experiences.

Another argument is that STTs allow participants to learn from other cultures (Johnson, 2000). This potential impact of STTs on participants is perhaps best summarised by Eyler and Giles (1999, p.17), who argue that STTs that place participants, *"in [a] context where their prejudices, previous experiences, and assumptions about the world are challenged may create the circumstances necessary for growth."*

A further stated benefit of STTs for participants is the depth of social interactions STTs allow (McGehee and Santos, 2005). This takes two forms; firstly, the relationship between participants themselves who can forge a strong group-identity, through shared norms and a sense of collective action (Coghlan, 2015). Secondly, the relationship between participants and members of the host community, with STTs active in communities creating an opportunity for intense social interactions (MacIntosh and Zahra, 2008).

In summary, research has suggested participants can become empowered advocates for global justice while forming lasting bonds with fellow participants and the host community. However, much of this is hard to measure. Furthermore, there are also suggestions these ideals may be utopian theories that rupture when translated into practice.

Criticisms

One of the main criticisms is connected to the motivation for joining a STT. While some scholars have focused on altruism as a motivation (Vodopivec and Jaffe, 2011), others have been more critical, focusing on motivations of participant benefit (Hustinx, 2001; Zehner, 2013). Motives suggested range from self-development (Brown, 2005) to an escape from the mundane, with Mohamud (2013) arguing, *"the developing world has become a playground for the redemption of privileged souls looking to atone for global injustices by escaping the vacuity of modernity."*

The most damning critique is that younger participants use STTs to build up their CV and become more employable by acquiring marketable skills (Sin et al., 2015). If this is the motive, it serves as a form of neo-colonialism with some scholars interpreting such an attitude as building a career off the back of the marginalised (Chaitoff, 2015).

Perhaps the most powerful criticism is that studies have shown little evidence of individual transformation (Probasco, 2013). Guttentag (2011) observes that the concept of transformation is rooted in an assumption that personal traits are flexible enough to be transformed by brief experiences, yet persistent enough to remain fixed afterwards. This seems a faulty premise, especially when trips will be short-term with participants only briefly exposed to the host culture.

While evidence is hard to find, Coghlan's research (2008) suggests that while individuals are committed while on the trip, there can be little long-term post-trip interest, while Friesen (2004) suggests there is a significant fall-off in positive attitudes and behavioural change in the year following the trip. If individual transformation acts as part of the raison d'être for STTs, this calls into question their purpose.

There has been some research into ways of mitigating against this. Ver Beek (2013) argues young people can be like saplings, with the STT experience 'bending' them on a temporary basis, but without additional reinforcement they return to their pre-travel trajectory. As a result, scholars have argued there is a need for a focused post-trip

programme in order to enable transformative learning, with Corbett and Fikkert (2009) arguing participants need to be supported through a mandated 'learning journey' of at least one year upon their return home to ensure the trip is a life-changing event, and not just another experience in an experience-driven culture.

A further criticism is the fear that STTs serve as inoculation against real personal transformation, with researchers noting examples of participants romanticising poverty and adopting a 'poor-but-happy' narrative that excuses poverty rather than inspiring opposition to it (Simpson, 2004a). 'Lotto logic' has also been noted as a negative response, with participants concluding they are 'blessed' to be born in comparative luxury, whereas those they encounter who live in poverty are 'unlucky'. Inequality is thus explained through a narrative of 'luck-of-the-draw', ignoring the role of the Global North in creating such systematic inequalities (Voelkl, 2013). Ultimately, experiences on STTs can allow reasons for inequalities to be disguised rather than exposed.

Perhaps the most important criticism is that even if transformation did occur in the life of participants, this should not be occurring at the expense of host communities, with any justification of STTs based on participant benefit which ignores the effects on the host community extremely dangerous (Taylor, 2015). This makes research on the impact of STTs on host communities even more relevant.

In summary, while scholars have noted the positive impact STT participation could have on individuals, the majority of research has tended to highlight the failings of STTs in achieving these aims.

4.1b Results

Before identifying key themes that emerged from the interviews, it is important to note that the sending organisation did not see the primary purpose of STTs as bringing about personal transformation of the participants:

"The focus must be on the community being supported rather than the team-members who are going. Yes, the experience should be a positive one for the individuals on the team but that is very much secondary… we are primarily a service delivery organisation rather than a team-taking organisation."

Within the focus-groups several key themes emerged, with a high consistency in the remarks.

The first area to examine is the motives of the participants in joining the team[2], as this will presumably influence if they are open to personal transformation. As in other research papers, there were a wide range of motivations, though a desire to 'make a difference' was the most common response, suggesting an altruistic motivation. Another motivation was disillusionment with aspects of life, with Elaine[3] (Group B) commenting:

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[2] It is important to note that stated motivation may not be the same as internal motivation
[3] Pseudonyms used throughout

"[I] was currently unhappy with what I was doing with my life: work, pay check, wait for Friday, and then repeat process. I figured there had to be more to life than that, maybe one where I wasn't always thinking about my own interests and could potentially help others."

Megan (Group B) mentioned her faith and desire to proselytise:

"It is our role to share the Gospel through the Great Commission and I saw this as one way in which this could be achieved."

Interestingly, several participants mentioned self-interest as a potential motivation, although they invariably viewed this in a negative light. This viewpoint was particularly common in Group B among those who had been in Kahara on more than one occasion. For example, Dennis stated:

"It is harsh of me to say this, but one STT in your life could almost come across as a CV filler, as something that would just look good for places you are applying to."

A second key theme that emerged was that participants felt the STT had caused them to reflect on their own lives. For example, Sophia (Group A) shared a personal story of an interaction that was special to her, before concluding:

"I don't have these same problems, even if it happened to me I would still be able to get educated at the same time. It challenges your ideals and beliefs and how we all can live in a bubble in our own world - it's a challenge to let that change you or set it aside as soon as you come home."

A number mentioned the impact meeting people their own age had on them, with Rhianna (Group A) challenged by the differing circumstances of their lives:

"I was speaking to some of the kids and one said, "I want to be a doctor but I know I'll never be one…." That was heart breaking because we're all going off to university in September."

Lorraine (Group B), while critical of STTs that were one-off trips, did argue STTs had the potential to shape participants:

"It can make you want to go back and the more you go back the more it changes you, and in the short-term if you let it, it can change how you think and deal with life. Short-term for me has made me appreciate and want to use my voice."

While it is difficult to measure what practical changes these reflections led to, there were several participants in all the participant focus-groups who credited the trip with either confirming their choice of vocation or causing them to change vocation. Furthermore, the majority of participants expressed a strong desire to return to the host community in the future. Indeed, a number of those interviewed had been to Kahara several times, and planned to return in the future.

Accounts of encounters of intimacy were prominent in focus-groups. These episodes often took the form of brief stories, and often led a participant to reflect on the meaning of their time away. A particular activity that was prominent in the accounts of participants were the home visits, with Patience (Group A) sharing:

"The house visits when we went into homes… it wasn't until then that it properly affected me… it feels distant until you are actually speaking to someone and they're telling you that they have eight kids living in a small little room. That's whenever it really hit me."

These encounters seemed to frame the sense of challenge, leaving a deep imprint on individual participants.

A common response from the focus-groups was that participants felt they had learnt a lot more from the host community than they had given, a response noted in other studies. There were a high number of comments to this effect, for example Lizzie (Group B) explained:

"I think I expected that I would be able to help them or do something. I didn't think about how much they would help me….. everyone says that, but when you go you genuinely say, "No, I learnt so much more from them.""

Another common response connects to the criticism within the literature of a possible romanticisation of poverty, with participants in Groups A and B commenting on the host community's 'joy despite their circumstances' and that, *"people see us as rich and them as poor; I'd say it's the other way around."* Phrases suggesting a belief in a 'lotto logic' also emerged, for example, *"how blessed and lucky we are to be born in a different country."*

However, it must be noted that often this language was used not to justify the status quo but to challenge it. For example, Megan (Group B), who had travelled to the community a number of times, stated:

"We in the West are so blessed by all we have materially, and it is our role as Christians to share that wealth with our neighbours all across the world."

A key theme to emerge was how important times in the evening for individuals to share their experiences were. This was an extremely common response, with every focus-group mentioning these as important. For example, Alice (Group A) stated:

"You need to take time. We had all those meetings where we chatted about what we'd seen that day, and if I hadn't done that, I probably would have exploded. It's really important to talk through with people and say what you found hard and what you found a really good experience."

On a related note, as the literature suggested, many noted the development of a shared bond with the rest of the team due to shared activities in the evenings as well as a belief that everyone had a common goal. This was prevalent throughout the focus-groups, with Rachel (Group A) commenting on how much she missed the team on her return home:

"You miss having the company, like when you are sitting in your house, on your own, where are my friends right now?!"

This quote raises another important theme, namely the difficulty many had upon returning home, particularly when communicating their emotions to those who had not been present. This was a particularly common response among those for whom this was their first time on a STT. Isabelle (Group A) articulated her struggles to adjust powerfully, including her sense of isolation:

"I remember whenever I got back, I think it was in church and I was just talking to people and I remember standing there… it just felt like everything was going really fast, like really strange, why is no one else stopping? They were… complaining about something and I felt like grabbing people and shaking them but, you can't. I was like that before…. until you experience it, you don't understand but at the same time I just wanted to be able to talk to somebody that could understand, and I just wanted everything to slow down. I just felt like everyone's exactly the same as before you left. So you'd come back and it's like why haven't things changed for everyone else?"

In a similar vein, many reported finding it difficult to maintain transformational change:

"I think it changes you dramatically in the weeks just after but I think it's really hard to keep being that person. I think you easily slip into the ways of being at home again. Like it's always in your head, what happened and what you've seen… but I think you fall back into old ways."

Lorraine (Group B), who had been to Kahara several times likewise articulated:

"My first experience broke me - you come back to normality, you convince yourself you have to wise up, you have to live here, so you feel dragged between the two. It needs to break me cause its wrong, but this is also where I am living. How do you use that to change who you are now?"

In summary, the STT experience seemed to stimulate self-reflection amongst participants, with many clearly articulating a sense of challenge based on their experiences. However, a common feeling was that it was difficult to maintain this attitude once back home, although some did say they found it easier when they spoke with others who had been on the trip.

4.2 Impact on the Host Community

"The road to hell is paved with uncritical intentions." – Vastri (2013, p.20)

One of the challenges as previously noted is that much of the research has focused on the participants of STTs, with comparatively little focus on the experience of the host communities. This demands remedy.

4.2a Literature Review

<u>Benefits</u>

It has been argued that STTs can be effective as part of a strategy for economic development (McGehee and Andereck, 2009) through injection of capital into local businesses, and also serve as a platform to gain support for local issues, allowing communities to leverage social capital to establish legitimacy, win allies and generate pressure on primary decision-makers (Farrell, 2013).

A further observation made was that while STTs were limited in what they could achieve due to their short duration, they could be effective if they partnered with active local institutions. Priest and Priest (2008) observed that collaboration with a local church allowed the STTs in their case-study to attract attention to work ongoing throughout the year, helping build the local church's credibility.

Other researchers praised the projects STTs were able to complete, with Brown and Morrison (2003, p.75) quoting a correspondent who says, *"When health care is provided and vulnerable children are housed and fed, hope springs forth… With that said, we have concluded that the role of the volunteer is not so much to accomplish something; that really is the local people's responsibility. Rather, the role of the volunteer is simply to serve."*

While summarising the benefits STTs can bring, this quote also touches upon some of the critiques within the literature.

<u>Criticisms</u>

One of the first criticisms within the literature is the neoliberal critique, with the actions of STTs interpreted in light of neoliberal ideology with the state increasingly rolled-back, with the work of STTs replacing the public-sector and serving as de-facto privatisation (Conran, 2011).

Another scholarly criticism is that interventions by STTs can be imposed, based around participant ideas of what is beneficial, rather than on those of the community, with interventions done to a community rather than with them (Guttentag, 2009). Furthermore, there can be a temptation for interventions to be adopted that STTs specialise in but which are not addressing the real problems. For example, STTs can adopt a relief-approach, while ignoring complex issues such as educational needs and community development (Farrell, 2013). Put provocatively, plasters get the attention while sores continue to fester. One case-study in Haiti seemed to show this, where STTs focused on building homes. However, the real issue was multigenerational poverty, with families returning to begging once the STT departed due to lack of employment opportunities (Elliott, 2013).

A related critique is the challenge of power dynamics. The practice of STTs travelling to the Global South can be interpreted to reproduce a division where the Global North produces altruistic 'helpers', while the poor South must be 'helped', with asymmetric power relations implicit throughout, and local knowledge delegitimised (McBride et al.,

2006). The risk of paternalistic attitudes were also noted, which can lead to negative attitudes to local leadership, with Zehner (2013) and Ver Beek (2006) noting examples of insubordination of STTs towards local leadership.

Furthermore, the power asymmetry increases when unqualified volunteers from the Global North inappropriately adopt the mantel of expert on arrival into a community, inadvertently reproducing cultural images of Western superiority. This issue is potentially even more dangerous due to the fact this asymmetric power relationship is often unacknowledged, and can easily be internalised by host communities (Corbett and Fikkert, 2009). Ultimately, STTs can reproduce existing power structures and inequalities rather than disrupt them. Fiske (1993, p.149) articulates this concept, arguing:

"Cross-cultural [interaction] which is initiated and directed by the more powerful of the two cultures (for power difference is always part of the cultural differences) always runs the risk of reducing the weaker to the canvas upon which the stronger represents itself and its power."

Another issue raised by researchers is the risk of creating dependency. Corbett and Fikkert (2009) argue that STTs often operate from a needs-based assumption, shifting impetus for change to outside the community, rather than within. Thus even if STTs are effective in completing their aims, they can still create dependency with host communities coming to rely on external sources of assistance rather than internal solutions, undermining capacity for development (Wesby, 2015). For example, some medical aid programmes have been argued to provide short-term benefits for a community, but also foster dependency on external support to the detriment of local solutions and undermine confidence in local healthcare providers (Decamp, 2007).

A related criticism is that STTs can undermine local economic development, with the work of STTs reducing local job opportunities, especially if the volunteers are offering free services (McGehee, 2014). Van Engen (2000, p.21) goes further, commenting, *"[STTs] almost always do work that could be done (and usually done better) by people of the country they visit."*

The risk of STTs being ineffective and destructive is raised by numerous scholars, especially when unskilled volunteers are involved who may be ineffective in the roles they adopt. An example given of how they can be destructive is the practice of STT participants forming emotional attachments to vulnerable children before moving on never to return, reinforcing cycles of abandonment (Tomazos and Butler, 2012).

Likewise, there is the danger of a clash between contrasting cultures due to differences in deeply-rooted values. Scholars have argued that STT participants travel from individualistic cultures in the Global North to more collectivistic cultures in the Global South (Wright, 2013), with STTs undermining local cultures and values. Klaver (2015) illustrates this with an example of STT participants casually displaying wealth in low-income areas, accentuating economic differences and leading to jealousy or aspirations in host communities that are impossible to achieve.

Indeed, the short-time scale that STTs will be in a community has been argued to create a focus on achieving a task in the limited time a STT has, rather than a focus on relationships which may be perceived as more important within the host community. This critique is perhaps best summarised by Adeney (2000, p.1):

"By definition, [STTs] have only a short time in which to 'show a profit', to achieve a pre-defined goal… projects become more important than people…. to prove the time and expense was well worth it. To get the job done (on our time scale)… individual drive becomes more important than respect for elders, for old courtesies, for taking time."

A related point has been raised about religious STTs, namely that while other STTs may aspire not to undermine host community values, a religious STT with an aim of proselytising intends to do the opposite (Guttentag, 2009). Proselytising can be resented if it is contrary to a host community's values, and if services are provided in 'exchange' for proselytising (Rohde, 2005).

A further criticism of scholars is of STTs disrupting community hierarchies through projects benefiting particular groups over another (Crabtree, 2008). Sin (2010) notes one example where a STT installed solar panels for a local school principal, yet the village chief didn't have access and was thus beholden to the owner and undermined in the eyes of the community.

A final criticism of the work of STTs is their short length, with Jaffe (2011) contending that there is a need for a continuity within relationships for successful collaboration, something STTs will be unable to provide by their nature.

In summary, while the benefits STTs bring to host communities have been noted, there has tended to be a greater focus on the dangers of STTs within academic literature. In light of this, it is important to see if this case-study suggests STTs have a positive or negative impact on host communities.

4.2b Results

Positives

Overall, the attitude to the work of STTs within the host community focus-groups was positive, with consistency among the responses.

One of the key positives to emerge was the impact of the public health and sports programmes facilitated by the STT. In relation to the public health programmes, participants in each focus-group praised the impact they had on the community, as well as the ripple-effect they could have upon education, with Samuel (Group H) saying:

"The programmes on malaria, jigger prevention, immunisation and maternal health – they have been empowering to the school community in such a way that you will find that many practices… have been adopted by the school community, and this means… they are going to send healthier children to the schools."

An interesting theme that emerged was how the STT highlighting a health issue led to it being seen as something that needed to be addressed, with Dorcas (Group E) stating:

"As Africans we used to take jiggers for granted - we didn't mind if it damaged our legs, but for them they saw it as a medical issue that needs medical attention."

It should be noted that there are power relations in play here, with some health areas seemingly more likely to be recognised as an issue to be addressed once identified by STTs.

A second theme to emerge was a belief that STTs had helped raise the profile of the school, leading to an increased school enrolment of 10-15% per year. Ruby (Group G) commented on how community attitudes had changed:

"[The STT] came and it's now admired to go to school. Before these teams came to the communities, children weren't interested in studying, but as these teams come, people admire and associate themselves with the teams, so this has forced them back to school so the number of school-going has increased."

Courage (Group D) similarly articulated:

"We used to let children stay at home, but when [the STT] started visiting our community, we started understanding the importance of education. They came with doctors, others who were nurses, others who were pastors, others who were sportsmen and women, so children got excited."

These comments connect strongly to the literature, where one of the key strengths of a STT is in attracting attention to programmes active within the community.

One interesting element to this was how the interactions with girls on the STT educated to secondary and tertiary level challenged norms about the value of educating girls, with Eveline commenting:

"I still remember the first time when they came, we mothers of Kahara were encouraged to bring our girls to school, whereby most of the girls in Kahara used to drop-out of school when they were still young. So I'm very glad of these people, because I have managed to take my girls until they have completed S4."

A third key strength of STTs noted were the relationships forged between the community and the STTs, with numerous examples of key moments of intimacy given in all the focus-groups, particularly in relation to the home visits. For example, Innocent (Group D) stated:

"For us Africans giving someone your child for them to handle is not easy…., but for them when [the STTs] are having your children and carrying your babies, however much the running noses are coming… they don't care - they just handle and just take care even when they stay with those children for one session, even if it is three hours…. So that is

why I have noticed there is a great relationship among us with them, and really that is true love."

A distinctive theme that emerged was the importance of members of the STT having returned to Kahara, with Mariam, the Chairperson of the School Management Committee (Group D), stating:

"I see most of them don't come only once, so I believe there is that link because someone wants to come almost every holiday when there is that opportunity…. so somebody visits here about 5 times, meaning he has undergone all that pain of getting that money for coming to visit us, so we feel very happy."

Such patterns have the potential to overcome some of the criticisms of STTs in the literature focusing upon their short duration.

This relationship between the host community and the STTs was partly associated with an increase in community buy-in to the school, with Alex (Group H) comparing Kahara School to other schools where STTs have not been present:

"We have seen the general community being very active in the school programmes…. I think this to a big extent is attributed to the relationship they have with the STT that keep coming regularly to the school…. you mobilise the school for a meeting and you have hundreds and hundreds of parents and other community members attending."

A final key strength was the feeling that there was a partnership of equals, with members of the community feeling STTs were open to listening and learning from the host community. Such views resonated with comments made by participants in STTs, with a strong theme emerging that participants felt the good relationship was due to the STT taking their lead from the community, with Will[4] (Group C) stating:

"We are learning as much from the communities as we feel we are offering them. Again and again we think we know what is needed and then when we listen to them we realise we have it all so wrong and they know best."

Interestingly, those who had been to Kahara on more than one occasion showed an awareness of some of the critiques of STTs, identifying a 'lack of humility and thinking we have all the answers', as well as 'doing things there that could be done by hiring locals' as issues they had reflected on. However, they mentioned these in the context of things they felt the NGO took lengths to avoid. It is unclear whether these observations were gleaned primarily from the pre-trip training programme or their observations having been on multiple trips.

Returning to the Ugandan focus-groups, overall the views were positive, with Emmanuel, (Group F), summarising:

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[4] Co-founder of the Irish NGO

"The visiting team is a blessing to Uganda, and we have created a relationship to the extent that we don't see the boundaries any more… The difference is the colour, but the blood is the same… we feel that we are special to have them as our brothers and sisters."

In summary, there were a number of strengths associated with the STTs, which resonated with strengths raised in the literature.

Negatives

One of the main concerns raised was a fear of dependency. Samuel (Group H) commented:

"Sometimes it creates dependency, saying that because this project is here it will continue giving us A, B, C and D and this means that sometimes when you talk to some community aspects they think that this will continue forever and we don't want this to be the case because we want all this empowerment… [so] that the school and the community can sustain themselves in the long-term."

The practice of distribution of 'gifts' by the STT was also criticised by a number of dissenting voices within Groups D and H, with a member of Group H stating:

"[Gifts] may create a dependency syndrome… yet some of the problems if thought about deeply within the community, can be solved by themselves."

However, the opposite perspective was also highlighted, with Joel (Group F) arguing relationships with STTs had helped build community cohesion:

"I have already been able to see very, very great changes… they mobilise themselves to contribute to improving their wellbeing in their community. The borehole has broken down for instance – how easy they are to mobilise themselves and raise resources to fix it. So generally, I feel that community has very much been strengthened by these visits."

This raises an interesting question; namely if it is fair to call this situation 'dependency'. The term implies the community may struggle to function if support is withdrawn, yet as the above example shows this is not the case. Furthermore, the community group existed long before the arrival of STTs in the community, and it is fair to ask if there is enough support from STTs to generate a 'dependant' relationship. Another issue is the term can appear paternalistic. This ideological baggage may suggest that an alternative term for the dangers of 'dependency' may be useful, such as 'crowding-out', whereby self-generated solutions to challenges are replaced by solutions which look to external sources as the answer to challenges.

Regardless of the term used, challenges of dependency/crowding-out did emerge within focus-groups.

A further challenge noted is how STTs could inadvertently threaten social hierarchies. For example, one community leader in Group D commented that in the aftermath there can be a 'battleground' for leadership, due to beliefs that those in leadership can benefit

from the partnership with STTs. While it was felt that the community group provided avenues for disagreements to be aired, the danger of disruption of social hierarchies was raised as a concern.

It should be noted that an opportunity to observe how conflict is negotiated emerged within the community leader group (Group D), where one participant articulated a query over a decision of the group, and this facilitated a discussion where views were shared. While this is encouraging, and suggests avenues exist for disagreements to be openly chaired and mediated, it does appear the existence of STTs in the community can lead to a potential 'battleground' for leadership. This must be acknowledged by STTs and great care should be taken to minimise harm.

A further observation is the challenge of true equality of relationships, as although the host community largely perceived the partnership as one of equals, there was a tendency within questions to interpret the STTs as 'giving' more than the host community did. For example, Douglas (Group D) stated:

"When you look at what they give us we have never given them anything – it is them who give us, they help us, they do all at their own cost. So I see actually that the partnership of peoples comes with the community benefiting more than the team that visits us."

This is despite the frequent comments by participants that they had 'received more than we had given'. This suggests that the criticisms raised in the literature of power dynamics not being sufficiently challenged by STTs have currency, and implies there is work to be done to achieve the stated intention of the NGO of having a 'partnership of equals'.

This criticism gives us insight into the issue of asymmetric power dynamics. For instance, while STTs passing on skills were praised within the focus-groups, there is a question to as to if STTs teaching 'skills' mean previous skills are delegitimised. An example is in the new cooking methods that were taught, with more traditional styles potentially relegated to a sub-standard role in the eyes of the community due to perceptions of modernity attributed to STTs. This is important to note in relation to a critique by Porter (2003, p.139), who states, *"overseas contact encourages the transfer of Western codes and fashions, reinforcing western cultural imperialism. Confidence in local ideas… may be one of the casualties of these interactions."* Real thought must be taken to ensure local knowledge is affirmed as new skills are imparted.

Further Observations

One concern raised in the literature did not arise. It was suggested teams with a religious element could threaten the culture with which they interact. However, the consensus of the focus-groups tended to the opposite, with a high number of individuals praising the religious elements they experienced. This is perhaps best explained by the majority faith in the area being Christianity, so the religious elements were seen as consistent with values the community held. For example, Toluwa (Group F) stated:

"We've always been very keen concerning the visitors.... we've always tried to test their doctrine, but concerning their doctrine we've seen we are always in the same spirit, so this is very good – it is not very far from ours."

A final point worth considering is the view that emerged strongly in six of the eight focus-groups that the team had been effective because it was part of a long-term partnership active throughout the year. For example, when asked if she thought the STT had been effective, Lizzie (Group B) stated:

"Yes because of a long-term purpose behind it. I don't know if it would have been if you had just been for those two weeks and that was it because I don't know if you would have done enough in that time to be effective. [The project] was running before that and had established contacts and the schools were there and it is still continuing… us going did have a purpose of encouraging, supporting and building on those relationships."

In summary, several conclusions can be drawn. The STTs were overwhelmingly seen as positive by the host communities, with many of the positives in the literature also highlighted in the focus-groups, while many of the negatives did not emerge as strongly as expected. However, there are areas where STTs could operate more effectively.

5. Conclusions

5.1 Key Findings

➢ Many participants felt challenged by their experiences, leading them to reflect on their own lives, with a significant number expressing a desire to return to Kahara.

➢ Phrases suggesting a romanticisation and rationalisation of poverty were voiced by some participants, albeit often in the context of a sense of challenge to respond to injustice.

➢ Times for self-reflection during the trip were identified as key by participants.

➢ Many participants described difficulty adapting once home, with several feeling isolated. Furthermore, participants claimed it was difficult maintaining transformational change.

➢ Both participants and hosts praised the relationships forged between the community and STT.

➢ Hosts identified participants returning to the community as important.

➢ Many hosts attributed an increased school profile to the visit of the STT.

➢ Dependency/crowding-out was identified as a risk.

Overall, these findings suggest STTs can be effective and beneficial, both in stimulating transformation in participants and in supporting host communities, albeit with negative outcomes that must be mitigated against.

5.2 Dangers Remain

"Contrary to popular belief, most [STTs] do not: empower those being served, engender healthy cross-cultural relationships, improve quality of life, relieve poverty, change the lives of participants [or] increase support for long-term missions work." – Lupton (2012, p.176)

However, the literature suggests there are enough dangers inherent in the STT phenomenon that it would be a mistake to use this case-study to absolve STTs of the 'sins' they have been accused of.

For example, as in this case-study, the danger of dependency/crowding-out remains. Furthermore, accounts of STTs undermining the local economy are too prevalent to ignore.

On the side of participants, the assumption that the experience will transform participants could also be misplaced, with studies suggesting many participants show little interest in the organisation on their return, and show little evidence of transformation when it comes to consumer choices, giving or involvement in social movements.

Such drawbacks lead to the conclusion that far from being beneficial, STTs have the potential to be destructive, and their growing proliferation suggests a cause for concern.

5.3 Risk Mitigation

However, this research suggests STTs can be effective and beneficial if operating within specific parameters. The reason many of these negative outcomes did not emerge as strongly in this case-study is potentially best explained by factors specific to the NGO:

➢ The existence of a long-term local programme, meaning the STT was plugging into work ongoing throughout the year.

➢ A primary objective of positive interventions serving the host community, rather than a primary objective of facilitating STTs which would risk STT interventions geared to primarily benefit participants rather than the host community.

➢ A long-term presence with participants returning, aiding relationship formation between participants and community members, and mitigating against the short-term nature of the visit.

➢ A commitment to capacity-building as a primary goal of the NGO, with a focus on empowering the host community and strengthening existing local solutions, mitigating against the dangers of creating dependency.

➢ A commitment to work alongside the strong community group and local NGO, following their suggestions on what the STT should do.

➢ A focus on relationship-building, allowing for deeper interactions between participants and community members.

➢ A commitment to avoid doing what locals could do themselves, with interventions focused on public health and sports programmes that would not occur otherwise.

➢ A strong component within the team with specific vocational skills.

➢ Time spent during the trip for self-reflection and sharing of experiences, aiding self-evaluation.

These factors allowed the STT to mitigate against the potential dangers highlighted previously. They could also suggest potential guidelines for best practice, which other organisations could emulate to avoid the risks STTs can present.

5.4 Areas for Development

This is not to say that this case-study presents a perfect example, as there are areas where the NGO could improve:

➢ **The dangers of dependency/crowding-out:** While there were encouraging signs of the STT and host community relationship stimulating positive responses to challenges, care must still be taken to ensure solutions are generated internally.

➢ **Self-perception of community:** While the host community were overwhelmingly favourable about the relationship with STTs, there did appear to be a perception among the community of being 'helped' and of not 'giving' to the participants. On the other hand, the participant focus-groups continually stated they received more than they had given. Such divergence in perspectives suggest that even otherwise effective STTs can perpetuate asymmetric power relationships between the Global North and South.

If communities feel a sense of inferiority, then the unspoken power disparities can mean the host community do not feel able to adequately direct or question the STT. This should be acknowledged by the NGO, with continued work to empower the community so they feel better able to question the STT, allowing a true partnership of equals to blossom. One way this could begin to happen is if participants communicate

more clearly how much they are receiving from the interactions, as for a partnership of equals there must an awareness of the mutual exchange of benefits.

➢ **Distribution of gifts:** Focus-group responses suggest a need to evaluate if this is appropriate or effective. At the very least, items should be distributed through local power structures, ensuring they are affirmed and not undermined, and ensuring neo-colonial tropes of Westerners as generous benefactors are avoided.

This connects to a wider recommendation to ensure an asset-based approach is taken by STTs, focusing on the assets host communities already have, as opposed to a needs-based one which looks at what they lack and what can be done by STTs to remedy this. STTs should complement local development processes rather than co-opting them.

➢ **Potential for conflict:** STT interventions can potentially lead to disruptions to community hierarchies. As a result, it is imperative that the NGO continues to liaise with the local NGO they partner with, who being staffed by local indigenous professionals will have greater insight into ways of mitigating this risk.

➢ **Encouraging returning participants:** The host community focus-groups frequent remarks of valuing returning participants suggest this is an important characteristic of STTs that should be encouraged. This also mitigates against one of the inherent weaknesses of STTs – their length. There is a need for a continuity within relationships for successful collaboration.

Indeed, Friesen's (2004) research suggests returning participants are much more likely to retain positive changes in beliefs, attitudes and behaviour during the year following a STT than first-time participants. This aligns with this research, with those who had been to Kahara on multiple occasions seemingly most aware of the potential dangers of STTs and speaking most clearly of a need to maintain transformational change. This is not to say that first-time participants should not form a significant component of STTs, but the research strongly suggests participants should be encouraged to return, helping strengthen relationships between the STT and the host community and increasing opportunities for participant transformation.

➢ **Pre-trip programme:** Pre-trip training is clearly identified within the literature as vital for preparing participants for confrontations with situations of injustice (Crabtree, 2008). Although the focus-groups spoke positively of pre-trip training, the frequent remarks from participants of 'receiving more than we gave' suggest it would be prudent for this to be more clearly stressed in preparation. The literature suggests the vast majority of STTs are of greater benefit to participants than to host communities, and that participants should come with this understanding (Johnson,

2000). While the NGO appears to be communicating this, it is vital they ensure participants are clear the trip is not about them or their experiences, but about building relationships with the community within the context of interventions the host community highlight as useful. Indeed, Ver Beek's (2006) research suggests participants adopting a humble 'learner' attitude tended to show the greatest life change in the year following the trip. Ultimately, training should be provided that stresses the need to adapt to and learn from the local culture.

➢ **Post-trip programme:** A major challenge emerging was the sense of isolation felt by participants post-trip, and opportunities for lasting transformation being stymied. This conforms to findings in the literature that participant transformation can be temporary, with Ver Beek's (2013) sapling metaphor a useful one to consider. In light of this, the lack of a formal post-trip programme by the NGO mean opportunities for personal transformation are being squandered.

Although the NGO's focus rightly remains on the host community, if participants continue to return to the host community it would be wise to ensure they are invested in as community advocates and supported on their re-entry into their home environment. Staying connected with participants would be a strategic investment of time, especially in light of research suggesting networks formed through such experiences have a significant impact on involvement in social justice movements post-trip (McGehee and Santos, 2005). STTs can be a potentially powerful event in a participant's life which can be a catalyst for transformation if supported by a strong post-trip programme.

5.5 Concluding comments

Ultimately, there is an urgent need for further research into the impact of STTs, especially considering their growing proliferation. For example, one area for further research would be a detailed quantitative study with similar focus-groups to adjudge the prevalence and accuracy of these stated viewpoints and conclusions, which was beyond the scope of this research.

The tentative conclusion from the data available is that STTs have too many negative impacts associated with them to justify their unchecked practice, unless they are occurring within very specific parameters. Indeed, many organisations should potentially reconsider sending STTs to host communities unless they are willing to invest the time and effort in following clear guidelines to 'do no harm'. This case-study highlights some baseline guidelines that have been effective in practice, and where improvement can be implemented in order to avoid participant transformation being temporary like Ver Beek's sapling (2013), or STTs 'trampling' host communities like Adeney's elephant (2000).

Ultimately, it is imperative that further case-studies of STTs are investigated to see if these conclusions are correct or anomalous, and to continue to build a case for improved practice for organisations and host communities which make use of STTs.

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