

THEMED SECTION**INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERISM AND DEVELOPMENT IN ASIA-PACIFIC**

WILEY

**International volunteerism and development in Asia-Pacific**Sallie Yea¹ | Harnng Luh Sin²  | Mark Griffiths³ ¹Department of Social Inquiry, La Trobe University, Wodonga, Vic., Australia²Department of Geography, National University of Singapore, Singapore City, Singapore³Centre for International Development, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK**Correspondence**

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In Asia, and across the “global South”, volunteerism has grown enormously in the last two decades. Hundreds of thousands of people now undertake work on development projects in poorer areas of the global South, and volunteerism has become a key way in which cross-cultural encounters form relations of development between poor and rich countries and between marginal and empowered subjects. Reflecting this growth, geographical discussions of volunteerism have expanded over the past decade. While initial work lauded the benefits and positive potentials of international volunteerism, more recent work and popular media have increasingly questioned such views and suggested that, instead, international volunteerism has the propensity to replicate colonial relationships, and benefits are heavily skewed towards volunteers. These criticisms themselves bear witness to deeper structural and ideological concerns principally centred around the pervasive neoliberalisation of international volunteering and volunteer tourism. Yet, despite its critics, international volunteering remains one of the most common and easily accessible ways in which (any)one can “care for” or “do their part” to address social and economic injustices in the global South. This themed section extends critical discussions of volunteerism in Asia-Pacific by questioning its developmental effects – including effects that are material, relational and discursive. Through the six papers in this themed section, and insights gained from fieldwork in Singapore, Japan, Cambodia and India, we consider the impacts of international volunteerism; the infrastructure and organisations promoting volunteerism; the subjective positionalities of volunteers; and how marginal populations experience volunteerism.

KEYWORDS

Asia-Pacific, critical perspectives, international development, relationships, volunteerism

1 | RESEARCH CONTEXT

International volunteering has attracted extensive academic attention in recent years. Broadly understood, volunteerism refers to undertaking work for altruistic reasons, where there is no expectation of remuneration or other immediate and tangible personal benefits accruing to the volunteer. The study of volunteerism includes examination of volunteers' experience while also including perspectives on the infrastructures that promote, organise and facilitate these experiences. In Asia-Pacific – and across the “global South” – volunteerism as a social relation of helping has grown enormously in the last two decades. This growth has occurred both in terms of international volunteering to and from the

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global South, and also domestically where volunteering is often seen as a means to cultivate civil society and civil citizens who “care” for the environment or others who may be in need (e.g., disadvantaged or less privileged groups). The articles in this themed section consider specifically volunteerism in an international context where volunteers cross borders to work on development projects. Its roots lie in the rise of state-funded projects like the Peace Corps in the USA, Voluntary Service Overseas based in the UK and Singapore’s Youth Expedition Project. Recent years have seen significant growth in “Peace Corp alternatives” that are run by non-government organisations, development charities and “gap year” for-profit “voluntourism” operators. Hundreds of thousands of people now undertake work on development projects in poorer areas of the global South¹ and volunteerism has become a key way in which cross-cultural encounters form relations of development between poor and rich countries and between marginal and empowered subjects.

Reflecting this growth, geographical discussions of volunteerism have expanded over the past decade. Initial work in the related field of volunteer tourism linked it with geographies of care and responsibility (Sin, 2010), and many papers have lauded the positive developmental and individual volunteer’s benefits of international volunteering (e.g., Scheyvens, 2002; Wearing, 2001; Wearing & Deane, 2003) compared with other forms of tourism² that are associated with negative environmental and social consequences. In recent years, geographers, alongside colleagues in cognate disciplines, have begun a more critical engagement with international volunteering, examining its claims to provide a more responsible, caring, developmentally beneficial and/or altruistic form of engagement with host communities. These critiques have variously questioned the material benefits accruing to “voluntoured” third world communities (McGehee & Andereck, 2009), the increasing commodification and professionalisation of volunteering (Baillie Smith & Laurie, 2011; Muthuri et al., 2009; Simpson, 2004), and the self as the privileged subject in volunteer tourism (Devereux, 2008; Diprose, 2012; Sin, 2009). Critiques of international volunteering and voluntourism have also emerged in popular, especially online, media. A search on the term “voluntourism” on Google in late 2017 yielded six critical posts among the first page of 10 sites.³ Most of these articles highlighted the power disparities between volunteers and visited communities, and posed pertinent questions of whether international volunteering does in fact bring about any benefits for visited communities. Alongside the emergence of academic articles critically evaluating international volunteerism and voluntourism, articles (Sin et al., 2015), opinion editorials and blogs online have also suggested that this has the propensity to replicate colonial relationships and benefits are orientated chiefly around volunteers.

These criticisms bear witness to deeper structural and ideological concerns around the neoliberalisation of international volunteering and volunteer tourism. Prominently, scholars have focused on commercialisation, CV building and entrepreneurialism (Griffiths, 2017; Palacios, 2010; Perold et al., 2011; Raymond & Hall, 2008) and the subtle but detectable rise of neoliberal moral economies of compassion, affect and emotion in the spaces of volunteering for development (Griffiths & Brown, 2017; Mostafanezhad, 2013; Yea, 2013). These literatures come together to produce a robust critique of the ways in which social and economic justice for the communities that “host” international volunteers remain elusive or sidelined in the spaces of volunteerism. As such, there is a definite sense among scholars in the field that the practice of international volunteering makes very little difference to structural inequalities that necessitate, facilitate and legitimise its spaces and mobilities. Yet, despite this critique, international volunteering remains one of the most common and easily accessible ways in which individuals with the necessary financial and educational resources can “care for” or “do their part” to address social and economic injustices in the global South.

This themed section therefore aims to extend these critical discussions of volunteerism in Asia through questioning its developmental effects – including effects that are material, relational and discursive. The papers in the themed section grow out of research presented in a panel on “International Volunteerism and Development in Asia-Pacific” at the Southeast Asian Geography Association International Conference at Siem Reap, Cambodia in 2014. Across the papers, authors engage with a number of issues. Firstly, the majority of papers discuss the impacts of international or cross-cultural volunteerism on development and poverty reduction with a focus on the less tangible aspects such as the relationships formed, maintained or broken in international volunteerism. Secondly, the ways in which various organisations and actors promote forms of international and cross-cultural volunteering that re-inscribe or challenge particular geographical imaginations of the “global South” also represent an important theme addressed in the papers. Thirdly, the papers address the key characteristics of international and cross-cultural volunteers in terms of motivations, ways of entering volunteering, skills and expectations, and how different types of volunteers bring subjective positionalities that may produce very different development outcomes for host populations. Fourthly, the experiences of marginalised populations – or “host” communities – in international volunteering are examined. Finally, the papers explore some of the linkages between state policies, the tourism industry, educational institutions, and volunteering, and their implications for development.

2 | CONTENT OF THE THEMED SECTION

The themed section opens with Mark Griffiths's (2018) contribution, which explores volunteer–host relations as an affective encounter, and examines the ways that scholars might better include hosts – or “Southern Others” – in writing on volunteering and development. This is a task he takes seriously, especially in the ethical context of colonial histories of representation and speaking for Others (Spivak, 1999). Through a rich and innovative narrative, Griffiths explores the potentialities of the body's intersubjective capacities to argue that “affective life in the spaces of volunteering opens up new possibilities for subjectivity that are insubordinate to – and therefore transcendent of – the subject positions delineated by the uneven flows of global power and privilege” (2018, p.116). While stopping short of celebrating affect as an undifferentiated (gender- and race-blind) ontology of experience (see Tolia-Kelly, 2006), this work suggests how research might become sensitive to the ways that international volunteering and development work take place outside of the flows of power that (re) produce hosts as hosts and volunteers as volunteers.

Tess Guiney's (2018) article similarly focuses on embodied aspects of volunteering to concentrate specifically on the emotional repertoires of volunteer work in Cambodia's orphanage tourism industry. That this can be called an “industry” is somewhat troubling and Guiney's analysis brings to light some of the more disturbing practices in these volunteer spaces. She presents an account of how the powerful effects of anger and shock mark the experience of volunteering in orphanages and how these overwhelm volunteers who, in some cases would be found “breaking down and crying in front of the children” (p. 130). What gives Guiney's research most insight, however, is her refusal to dwell on the obviously painful experiences of the volunteers and her focus on the even more disconcerting development that the children in these orphanages have their subjectivities commodified. Guiney argues: “children are expected to be ‘poor-but-happy’ and to engage intimately with volunteers and visitors to engender tourist satisfaction and encourage sympathy and donations” (p.124). In effect, therefore, orphanage directors have become “emotional supervisors” who mobilise “love and emotions” to facilitate unequal encounters of tragedy and sympathy.

Remaining in the context of Cambodia, Chen's (2018) article provides a contrasting story of interpersonal relationships in international development volunteering. Drawing on a rich account of fieldwork with the Singapore International Foundation's volunteering “Specialist Projects” at five different sites in Cambodia, Chen shows how “reciprocal relationships over time are crucial in intangible and sustainable development impact” (p. 139). The emphasis on “intangibility” is refreshing as Chen moves away from the idea that volunteers might be able to address “macro-structural inequalities of poverty”, an unfortunate – and impossible – standard to which volunteering has been held for too long, and one that it will never meet. Instead, her focus on reciprocity seeks to bring hosts – a key (*the* key), yet too often neglected, stakeholders – into perspectives on volunteering to consider their “indispensable role” in providing successful development impacts. Chen's argument rests on the premise that trust and friendships between volunteers and hosts complicate the temporality of much-criticised short-term placements, pointing out: “volunteers commit not just to projects, but also to personal relationships with hosts . . . [and] while projects end, the friendships built overtime can continue, and with them the possibility of future collaborations” (p. 143). If, as Chen suggests, this possibility includes access to fund-raising structures, English language learning and shared technical advice, then it is important that research continues into the importance and potential of interpersonal relationships in international volunteering.

Schech et al. (2018) similarly focus on the relationships that are formed in the communities in which volunteers work. Moving on from the sometimes debilitating notion that development encounters present insurmountable difference, their inquiry examines how “the relational and partnership aspects of volunteering contribute to its effectiveness” in long-term placements of between one and three years. In an animated account of their survey and workshop data, Scheh et al. illustrate the ways that “understanding difference is played out through care, mutual respect and openness towards the other” (p. 147) to argue that relationships on the ground – across cultural difference, and across the uneven divisions of globalisation – “are central to achieving development impacts, as well as being outcomes in their own right” (p. 148). This moves us, Scheh et al. further argue, towards “reconcil[ing] different expectations and outcomes of volunteerism” (p. 147). Again, therefore, there is the important recognition that volunteering is not so much about reducing the stark structural inequalities that facilitate (or necessitate) volunteerism – for that must surely be the responsibility of governmental and transnational organisations – but that it can make meaningful difference to the relationships between people of richer and poorer areas of the world. We welcome this and the other contributions that highlight this important role of international volunteering.

In an exploratory and insightful piece, Baillie Smith et al. (2018) open a new avenue of research that reflects the changing geographies of international volunteering and development. While the overwhelming majority of research, including that of this themed section, has focused on North–South movements of volunteers, their research examines the growing numbers of Southern participants who cross international borders to volunteer within the global South. Baillie Smith et al.

critically engage with the ways that volunteers evoke geographies of a homogeneous South that is premised on a distance from the development practices of the North (or the “West”). What is especially insightful within this geography – and the research – are the ways in which homogeneity meets limits, and volunteers begin to articulate hierarchical orderings of relations between Southern constituents; and how these hierarchies relate, somewhat troublingly, to racialised development imaginaries. Their exploration of these geographies opens new avenues for research that we hope scholars will pursue in the coming years.

Pushing further in this direction, Yea (2018) closes the themed section with research showing that the Asia-Pacific region is no longer simply a recipient of international volunteers but an important contributor of international volunteers to the rest of the world. The last two papers in this themed section therefore work to shift the focus and fundamentally question what “international” means in volunteerism. Yea’s focus is on Singaporean youth who volunteer “at home” in Singapore with trafficked and exploited migrant workers. Such volunteering “at home”, Yea argues, can thus involve transcending international cross-cultural barriers and contribute to novel expressions of cosmopolitan relations and sensibilities. Importantly, Yea points out, if this is the case then international volunteering at home destabilises established geographies of development and volunteering. In doing so, she closes the themed section appropriately by summing up a key focus of the six articles included, while also indicating an important area in need of more research.

3 | CONCLUSION

The impetus for this themed section lay in our view that international volunteering is not only growing in scope and scale, and therefore worthy of more scrutinising attention for this reason, but also provides some marked departures from early – and generally uncritical – assessments of it. When evaluated, international volunteering normally tends to be assessed in terms of tangible material outcomes for host communities (where it has continually been shown to fall short of its stated goals), or in terms of the fulfilment of markers of statist or personal achievement, particularly among youth who volunteer. The papers in this themed section aimed especially to shift this focus to explore more fully the relationships arising in international volunteering. All the papers provided much food for thought in terms of the complexities of relationships in international volunteering; between hosts and volunteers, among volunteers, and between volunteers and the organisations that support them. When approached through the lens of emotional and relational geographies, research on international volunteering can introduce some novel insights into the experiences, possibilities and practices of those involved. Importantly, we hope such insights go some way towards unsettling the mutability of hosts, the dynamics of host–volunteer relations, and the structural rigidities of volunteer organisations.

Beyond this, the papers in this themed section allow us to begin engaging with Asia as not only a site to which volunteers travel, but also one from which volunteers emerge, to consider the implications the advent of social media and other global technologies is having on the practice of international volunteering, and to reconsider how success in international volunteering is understood. It is our hope that the papers in this themed section will enliven both the academic and policy conversation around international volunteering.

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ENDNOTES

¹ A 2008 study, for example, stated that 1.6 million people volunteered abroad during that year. See: TRAM: www.atlas-webshop.org/epages/61492534.sf/en_GB/?ObjectPath=/Shops/61492534/Products/ATL_00073

² Volunteer tourism may be distinguished from volunteerism more generally in its specific focus on organised and facilitated travel for the primary purpose of engaging in short-term volunteer work stints. It is also sometimes referred to as voluntourism.

³ Some well cited examples of critiques on online media include: “Beware the voluntourist doing good” (www.theguardian.com/world/2013/feb/13/beware-voluntourists-doing-good); “The voluntourist’s dilemma” (www.nytimes.com/2016/03/22/magazine/the-voluntourists-dilemma.html?_r=0); “JK Rowling condemns voluntourism” (www.independent.co.uk/news/people/jk-rowling-twitter-voluntourism-volunteering-in-orphanages-risks-a7204801.html); “The problem with little white girls, boys, and voluntourism” (www.huffingtonpost.com/pippa-biddle/little-white-girls-voluntourism_b_4834574.html).

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