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Autopsy of an International Alternative Break

Student Volunteers and the New Washington Consensus

ABSTRACT International volunteering has become a popular way for students to travel, engage in rewarding service, and build credentials of global citizenship for a competitive job market. In this context, we explore a puzzling phenomenon: why would a group of students choose to end a seemingly successful international volunteer program legitimized by affirmation from their community partner in the global South, their peers, and their institution? Research has shown that international volunteering organizations, and development organizations more broadly, are resilient, even amid critique, as they continually reconstruct their legitimacy *vis-à-vis* donors. We argue, however, that student volunteer organizations that intentionally foster reflexivity in development work may choose organizational demise after grappling with the tensions inherent in international alternative breaks. These volunteer programs train students in critical perspectives on international development, yet the institutional conditions under which they operate, as well as some of their implicit neoliberal assumptions, frustrate the realization of this critique in practice. Students develop critical and neoliberal anxieties that lead them not only to indict the moral legitimacy of the organization but also to reject the credentials and career paths of global citizenship they initially sought to attain. **KEYWORDS** Development, neoliberalism, voluntourism, New Washington Consensus, legitimacy, affective and emotive experience, student volunteer, global citizenship

Western development practitioners are increasingly aware that their own (institutional) cultures are partially responsible for development projects failing, due to a reluctance: to learn lessons from previous interventions; to hear, understand, value local perspectives and knowledge; to give up power; and to question the superiority of Western knowledge and experience.

Susanne Schech, Tracy Skelton, and Anuradha Mundkhur (2016:149)

Students for Empowering Development in Ghana (SEDG)¹ was the archetype of a reflexive model of international volunteering for university students. SEDG was created by students eager not only to make a difference through volunteering, but also to avoid the known problems plaguing much of the development industry. The organization operated for 10 years as an alternative break under the national (U.S.) organization Break Away, which sends students from at least 250 universities to donate their time and resources to development projects in communities at home and abroad (Break Away

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2020). As a Break Away affiliate, SEDG explicitly framed its international volunteer programs as a corrective to the ethical dilemmas posed by voluntourism. Students engaged in education and reflection before and during the trip that encouraged critical perspectives on the conventional development model, where the Western student is the active donor and the community the passive recipient. As they worked with rural communities in the Volta region of Ghana from 2008 to 2018, SEDG students aimed to forge mutually beneficial partnerships (MBPs), or horizontal relationships requiring equal respect and participation to accomplish shared goals.

By conventional measures, the student group had a high degree of success in their work. In one community, in just seven years, volunteers completed a public latrine, a latrine at the primary school, a refurbished maternity ward, and almost completed a new primary school building. Community leaders welcomed the group and lauded their contributions, even attributing the community's relative immunity during a cholera outbreak to the latrines the students had built. But despite the apparent mutual benefit, by 2018 students made the surprising decision to suspend the organization's work indefinitely.

This decision is even more puzzling considering its institutional context. The student organization was housed at William & Mary (W&M), a liberal arts research institution in Virginia. W&M is home to 6,500 undergraduates and presents itself as *the* university for service-minded students. The university has been named a top volunteer-producing school for the Peace Corps in the last 11 consecutive years and is listed among the top 10 schools for most students involved in community service (W&M 2021; Zagursky 2019). With one of the lowest percentages of students receiving Pell Grants nationwide and the lowest in the state of Virginia, W&M lacks socioeconomic diversity, and its student body is approximately 55% White (Fearing 2019; Martell 2016; W&M 2020). As ambitious, passionate, upper-middle-class, mostly White students with an abundance of institutional support, W&M undergraduates are eager volunteers. The SEDG students' successes were rewarded with not only the personal satisfaction of service work, but also social capital *vis-à-vis* their peers and university, new lines in their CVs, and impressive stories for job interviews. SEDG, like similar organizations, offers universities and students a way to reconcile the problematic aspects of international volunteering with the pressure to develop the skills of global citizenship in a competitive global labor market. Given these incentives from their university, peers, and future employers to sustain their international partnerships, why would a group of students opt for organizational demise?

To explore this question, we bring together research on organizational legitimacy with several strands of scholarship that consider the possibilities and limits of international volunteering for development in the context of neoliberalism and its emphasis on privatization, liberalization, and individual responsibility. The first strand demonstrates the failures of international volunteering as students and other volunteers reinscribe neoliberal policies, practices, and imaginaries for development that fail to address the root causes of global inequalities (McGloin and Georgeou 2016; Mostafanezhad 2013; Sin 2010; see also Ferguson 1990; Mitchell and Sparke 2015; Roy 2010). However, this

literature also points out that international volunteering organizations tend to persist, despite such failure, mirroring trends in the broader development industry. Just as conventional development professionals and organizations have career and financial incentives to persist (Ferguson 1990), student volunteers gain new skills and opportunities for personal growth, while the development industry itself establishes the logic and ideology that allow students to construct quantifiable indicators of their “success” (Pearce and Coghlan 2008; see also Apthorpe 2011). A second strand focuses on the affective and emotive experiences of volunteers and the potential to foster critical perspectives on development (Duffield 2012; Fee and Gray 2011; Frontani and Taylor 2009; Georgeou and Engel 2011; Tiessen and Heron 2012; see also Schech 2017). This work helps us illuminate how students may recognize their work as a failure, despite industry-defined successes. Integrating this research with insights from the literature on organizational legitimacy allows us to identify the conditions under which demise might emerge, as well as the contradictions that accompany it.

Through this analysis, we argue that students chose the demise of their organization after grappling with the tensions inherent in international alternative breaks. Volunteer programs may train students in critical perspectives on international development. Yet the institutional conditions under which they operate, as well as some of their implicit neoliberal assumptions, frustrate the realization of this critique in practice. Identifying their “successes” as Band-Aid solutions to structural problems, students chose to end their partnership, concluding that international alternative breaks are incompatible with the ideal of equity that originally attracted them to, and was cultivated by, the program itself. Finally, while such organizations claim to arm students with the credentials of global citizenship that allow them to pursue similar work in the future, the organization’s perceived failure compelled some students to reject these credentials and the pursuit of careers in international development.

STUDENT VOLUNTEERS AS NEOLIBERAL PHILANTHROPISTS

The international volunteering and philanthropy we see today—from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to student-led alternative breaks—must be understood as responses to liberal market expansion (Mitchell and Sparke 2015). As the neoliberal policies of the Washington Consensus became dominant in the 1980s and 1990s, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund enforced liberalization in the global South through structural adjustment programs (Harvey 2005; Klein 2007). Communities in the South have decried the devastation caused by these programs (Bello and Guttal 2006; Mkandawire and Soludo 1998), and the elite response has been to roll out a *New Washington Consensus* that seeks to use “micro-market transformations to compensate for macro-market failures” (Mitchell and Sparke 2015:724; see also Roy 2012). At the heart of the *New Washington Consensus* is a critical tension: “today’s market philanthropists openly acknowledge some of the market failures of the preceding era”; yet their “solutions” reinstate neoliberal practices (Mitchell and Sparke 2015:727; see also Rankin 2001; Roy 2012).

Recent scholarship suggests that international volunteering organizations, as a subset of development organizations, also embody these tensions of the New Washington Consensus. Increasingly, students and other volunteers are critical of the failures of previous development work and past models of volunteer participation and are drawn to organizations that claim to break this mold. We refer to these organizations as reflexive international volunteering organizations (RIVOs); they intentionally distinguish themselves from the earlier models of “voluntourism.” RIVOs forge alternative discourses of international volunteering that claim to challenge the problematic donor–recipient relationships introduced by the Cold War–era modernization school (e.g., Rostow 1960) and reproduced in new ways by neoliberal advocates. In these conventional models, Northern donors bring expertise, technical solutions, and policy advice that Southern recipients are expected to receive gladly while avoiding becoming “dependent” on donors (Kaler and Parkins 2015). The RIVOs’ new discourse, in contrast, centers the idea of MBPs (Schech, Skelton, and Mundkhur 2016; Scheyvens 2011). Rather than giving aid that encourages “dependency” on foreign volunteers among “abject recipients,” volunteers are “building capacity” and “empowering” communities (Bhattacharya 2004:13; McGehee and Andereck 2008; McLennan 2014; Schaaf 2015:69). Volunteers become what Roy (2010:12) terms the “modern, Western self who is not only aware of poverty’s devastation but is also empowered to act upon it in responsible ways” (see also Simpson 2004).

Despite this seemingly transformational discourse, in practice, RIVOs must be understood as situated within the broader development industry and thus likely to mirror the tensions in the New Washington Consensus. While RIVOs are distinct given their reliance on the time and financing of student volunteers, they have ideological and institutional constraints similar to those of more conventional development organizations. International volunteering remains part of the commoditization and privatization of development, as Western students have the resources to travel and enact care and responsibility for less fortunate Others (McGloin and Georgeou 2016; Mostafanezhad 2013; Sin 2010). Moreover, the institutional conditions under which student volunteer organizations operate constrain their ability to escape neoliberal practices. Students raise funds by writing grants with quantifiable goals; projects are chosen for expedience and feasibility in short time frames to accommodate students’ university schedules; and students are rewarded by peers, universities, and future employers for their ability to enact short-term success and demonstrate their global citizenship (Lyons et al. 2012; Roberts 2004). Thus, even if the volunteers in RIVOs understand structural issues, these projects end up looking like the technical solutions of earlier eras, and students are (often unwittingly) “enlisted into entrepreneurial market-mediated partnerships and pulled away from making demands on the state for protection and relief from social injustice” (Mitchell and Sparke 2015:724).

Despite these failures, international student volunteering for development has stubbornly remained a feature of the Western university experience. Reflecting James Ferguson’s (1990) findings on the development industry more generally, RIVOs have constructed their own “development discourse” to justify and sustain their mission,

allowing them to persist (see also Apthorpe 2011; Escobar 1995). Sin, Oakes, and Mostafanezhad (2015:122) describe this as a form of “neoliberal governmentality,” in which the voluntourists “constitute themselves simultaneously as competitive, entrepreneurial, market-based, individualized actors and caring, responsible, active, global citizens.” Volunteers wish to use their privilege to make amends for “the historical exploitation and environmental mistakes on which their society has been built,” but they also “have their own needs to fulfill” (Pearce and Coghlan 2008:132, 141). As a result, student volunteers “who often claim to oppose the privileging processes of neoliberalism may, in fact, help to drive it” as they “outwardly demonstrate their claims to global citizenship” (Lyons et. al. 2012:371, 363). The micro-level interventions developed under the New Washington Consensus fail to solve the root causes of poverty and inequality. Yet they allow quantitative measures of “success” (e.g., number of latrines or schools built, number of wells dug) that satisfy donors, peers, universities, and future employers.

QUITTING FAILURE

The research on international volunteering and the New Washington Consensus demonstrates why we would expect RIVOs to fail in their development goals and yet persist as organizations. But how do we explain when they do not persist—when students decide to disband the organization, despite institutional incentives to continue? Here we bring together insights from Suchman’s (1995) work on organizational legitimacy and research on the affective and emotive experiences of volunteers to consider how volunteers might evaluate the legitimacy of their organization (Duffield 2012; Fee and Gray 2011; Frontani and Taylor 2009; Georgeou and Engel 2011; Tiessen and Heron 2012; see also Schech 2017).

Suchman (1995:574) suggests that organizations persist to the extent that they are viewed as legitimate, or “desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions.” Legitimacy can stem from multiple sources, although the most consequential audiences are those invested in an organization via their funding or time. The literature on the development industry more broadly suggests that development organizations construct measures of success amid failure to maintain their legitimacy to donors (Apthorpe 2011; Ferguson 1990). However, for many RIVOs, the donors are the students. Volunteers donate their time not just to the project but also to fundraising. Therefore, it is the student volunteers whose evaluation of the organization becomes most critical.

Suchman (1995) distinguishes among three types of legitimacy, two of which are most relevant here: pragmatic and moral. Student volunteers are likely to evaluate an organization based on its pragmatic legitimacy, or the degree to which it meets their needs—in this case, to fulfill the claims to global citizenship they seek to add to their résumés in a global marketplace. However, student volunteers under the New Washington Consensus also seek a morally legitimate organization, or an organization that “effectively promotes societal welfare, as defined by the audience’s socially constructed value system” (579). Indeed, RIVOs are embedded in seemingly “universal codes of responsibility” that

require volunteering to be “green,” to “give back,” and to avoid exoticizing Others (Sin, Oakes, and Mostafanezhad 2015:123). Moreover, RIVOs do not simply seek to fulfill volunteers’ moral desires; they also aim to deepen that morality by requiring education and self-reflection designed to address “questions of cultural hegemony, international and class privilege, and the extent of relative economic advantage” that previously have been “at best, understood in a vague, not an analytical, way” (Hutnyk 1996:44; see also Diprose 2012; Scheyvens 2011).

While the goal for RIVOs is to foster broader social action and cultivate volunteers as “lifelong agent[s] of change” (McGehee and Santos 2005:772; see also McGehee and Andereck 2008; Scheyvens 2011), the research on volunteers’ affective and emotive experiences suggests more complicated outcomes. Volunteers in RIVOs constantly and anxiously evaluate themselves, each other, and their organizations regarding their “apparent failure to live up to those norms or standards,” however ambiguous they may be (Sin, Oakes, and Mostafanezhad 2015:123). Volunteers return home with an “uncomfortable, unsettled ambivalence and reflexivity” about their ability to “act responsibly” (Noxolo 2011:222; see also Sin 2010, 2014). Legitimacy can be resilient to particular adverse events, but overall, it is dependent on a history of events (Suchman 1995:574). Rather than claim success by pointing to the quantitative results of technical solutions, students exposed in their training to critical perspectives on development may begin to question the moral legitimacy of the RIVO itself. This suggests that the tension at the heart of the New Washington Consensus—seeking to understand and redress past wrongs of development—may undermine the organization.

This is not to say that, as students question the moral legitimacy of RIVOs, they necessarily do so in transformational ways that challenge neoliberal logics. We suggest that, as students come to recognize the shortcomings of their organization’s short-term, technical interventions in the context of historical and structural problems, they develop both *critical anxieties* and *neoliberal anxieties* that stem from the tensions within the New Washington Consensus. Critical anxieties are concerns that they—and the organization—are not living up to the norms and values of “alternative” development they aspire to, even if their understanding of these norms is inchoate (see also Sin, Oakes, and Mostafanezhad 2015). Neoliberal anxieties similarly stem from concerns about their own and the organization’s legitimacy; however, these anxieties reproduce the “specter of dependency”—a view that ultimately “blame[s] locals for being backward, lazy, or generally unequipped for the modern world” (Kaler and Parkin 2015:402; see also McLennan 2014; Raymond and Hall 2008; Schech, Skelton, and Mundkhur 2016; Swidler and Watkins 2009).

Despite these somewhat different indictments, both responses can call into question the moral legitimacy of the organization. Suchman (1995) suggests that these anxieties are likely to bring organizational restructuring, as members try a range of strategies to achieve legitimacy. However, as the institutional context of a student organization makes it impossible to pursue projects that can solve the historical, structural problems that might bring the transformation they aspire to, intensification of these anxieties may bring organizational demise. Moreover, these anxieties can have broader effects by calling into

question the organization's pragmatic legitimacy—that is, its ability to provide the students with the skills and credentials of global citizenship. As students question the organization's moral legitimacy, and international development work, they may question these credentials and reject international service and careers in the future.

METHODOLOGY

To explore how student volunteers' affective and emotive experiences might influence organizational persistence or demise, we focus on SEDG as a case study. SEDG was selected as a *deviant* case: that is, the organization deviated from theoretical expectations (Seawright and Gerring 2008). Research suggests that RIVOs, and more broadly NGOs focused on development, persist over time despite objective evidence of their failures (Apthorpe 2011; Ferguson 1990). Yet SEDG students made the unanticipated decision to suspend their organization. This provides an opportunity to explore more deeply the experiences of student volunteers as they may interact with institutional conditions to produce new outcomes.

To explore this case study, we collected and analyzed two key types of data. First, one of the authors (FarrHenderson) conducted 16 semi-structured interviews, 15 with former participants and leaders of SEDG and one with a former W&M employee who advised the organization. Interview participants were selected via a network sampling strategy. To communicate with respondents, the director of the Office of Community Engagement at W&M emailed 61 past participants of SEDG on our behalf. As respondents self-selected into the study, this sampling style likely lent itself to those who had stronger opinions, either positive or negative. That said, the study captured perspectives from students participating in every cohort year, 2008 to 2018, except for 2013. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours and were audio-recorded and transcribed. Each respondent, as well as the organization itself, has been assigned a pseudonym. For confidentiality, neither the community partner nor the NGO in Ghana is identified.

Second, we analyzed approximately 180 primary documents from SEDG's online organizational archive. This included budget reports; training manuals; minutes and notes from meetings with participants, leaders, professors, and the partner NGO; and survey and interview data collected from the community partner. Beyond thematic analysis, the documents helped us establish an objective timeline and history of the organization that could supplement accounts given by participants, which may have suffered from recall bias.

EMBODYING THE NEW WASHINGTON CONSENSUS

The key tension of the New Washington Consensus that RIVOs embody is a recognition of past mistakes and a sense of individualized empowerment to fix them. This tension was evident in SEDG from its inception. Originally known as Students for Medical Aid in Ghana (SMAG)², the organization was launched in 2008 as a chapter of the national

organization, Break Away. Break Away (2020) describes an alternative break in terms that clearly differentiate it from the critiques of voluntourism:

Each trip has a focus on a particular social issue, and immersion in that issue begins long before the trip itself. Students educate themselves and each other, then do hands-on work with relevant organizations. These experiences challenge them to think critically and compassionately. . . . Upon return, participants are empowered to make more informed decisions and to take meaningful action that supports a greater good.

Alternative breaks promise to transform students into individuals for whom “community becomes a priority in values and life choices” (Break Away 2020). In the same way that market philanthropists recognize the failures of past philanthropy, Break Away attempts to establish an emergent paradigm: that of a RIVO.

W&M students were attracted to both the pragmatic and the moral legitimacy promised by Break Away’s more critical approach to the development industry. All the students were drawn to an opportunity to travel, and many imagined themselves working in careers in international development in the future. Yet compared to other international volunteer opportunities, SEDG offered not just the pragmatic legitimacy of developing the skills of global citizenship but also the moral legitimacy of an organization committed to ethical volunteering. As Kim explained:

I’m not going on vacation for three weeks and volunteering one of the weekends to make me feel better about my own privilege. It really was genuine, I am here to learn, I’m here to help but not to boost my résumé or boost my confidence. I felt everybody in our group was there for the right reasons.

Half of the respondents indicated they had been motivated to join SEDG because of their desire to discover more ethical approaches. Some students learned about more critical perspectives on development in their coursework, while others experienced the pitfalls of voluntourism with other organizations and sought to overcome them. Thus, with a group of students more critical than the average voluntourist, SEDG embarked in 2008 on its first alternative break trip. Students worked with a traveling health clinic to address gaps in rural health care access in the Volta region of Ghana.

However, as a RIVO, with pre-trip trainings and post-trip reflections designed to foster an “alternative” perspective on development, SEDG students soon turned a critical eye to their own efforts. They learned that Ghana has a National Health Insurance Scheme, meant to provide affordable healthcare access to all Ghanaian citizens. Volunteers were concerned that with this scheme in place, the traveling clinic was irresponsible. Nichole participated from 2009 to 2011 and received a grant to conduct a survey to assess the clinic. She found that some Ghanaians in rural areas chose to use the clinics staffed by volunteers as their primary care, because it seemed more convenient than making an annual trip to the city to renew their insurance. Some people paid more at the traveling clinic than they would pay with insurance to visit a professional—undermining the public goods provided by the government. Reflecting the ethos of the New Washington Consensus, the students identified the traveling clinic as replicating past,

failed approaches to development and felt, as Roy (2010:12) puts it, “empowered to act upon [this realization] in responsible ways.”

Questioning the moral legitimacy of the traveling clinic, the students sought to restructure the organization to better reflect their critical perspectives. Around the same time, a Ghanaian volunteer with the clinic established an NGO with the aim of addressing rural/urban disparities. A W&M student stayed in Ghana with the NGO in the summer of 2010 and then returned with a new direction for the organization. Beginning in 2011, the students would work with this new NGO and build MBPs with local communities. As Adam explained, “At the very best we were putting a Band-Aid over something that required something much greater. The medical trips really didn’t accomplish anything. A [partnership] makes a bigger difference than getting some Tylenol.” To facilitate this new approach, SEDG announced a new mission: to “establish partnerships with local communities and NGOs in Ghana and carry out research which helps elucidate community needs and facilitate community-based development that is sustainable, ethical, and inclusive.”³ Around this time Students for Medical Aid in Ghana changed its name to Students for Empowering Development in Ghana to better reflect the new orientation.⁴

To facilitate this approach, the students sought to deepen their critical understanding of development. Indeed, students felt empowered to build the organization’s moral legitimacy by fixing “gaps” and “mistakes” in the program’s training. As Sally explained, “I thought in a stupid, probably naive way that I would be able to recenter the project in a way that it would actually be able to have a positive impact. And that was a large part of my decision to return.”

Although Break Away encourages entirely student-led alternative breaks, SEDG leaders sought oversight from a W&M professor. Through regular meetings with the faculty advisor and suggested readings, SEDG students deepened their knowledge of ethical development theory and practice. Meeting minutes from the organization in 2011 recount conversations and agreements among students that their role in a partner community was to “provoke and facilitate and nurture [the community’s] own sense of what the top problems are.”⁵ Student volunteers hoped to “more fully empower [the community] to act with agency” and not to be their “protectors.”⁶ Through this study, the students developed a new set of “precepts and shared beliefs.”⁷

The new “precepts and shared beliefs” embodied both the critical and the neoliberal anxieties at the heart of the New Washington Consensus. The students clearly demonstrated critical anxieties in their determination to overcome the mistakes of past development models. Central to their “shared beliefs” were ideas such as “uninformed good intentions can cause more harm than good” and “research informs sustainable service.”⁸ At the same time, neoliberal anxieties compelled the students to guard against the “abject” recipient with the idea that “sustainable” solutions would come from the individual abilities—of the students and the community—to act both entrepreneurially and responsibly to solve development problems. For themselves, they committed to the idea that “our actions will be characterized by forethought. Our group will not enter a country without clearly defined goals and individuals trained to meet those goals.”⁹ It was believed

that this action would instigate a similar response in the community to embrace their individual agency to enact change, which would result in a feeling that “we have accomplished something together.”¹⁰ This seemingly transformational set of ideas thus rested on neoliberal assumptions about individual solutions to structural problems. Despite a focus on community agency, SEDG’s restructuring plan still reflected neoliberal assumptions about the “abject” nature of communities in the global South, which could easily become “dependent” on the student volunteers.

INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINTS

SEDG’s restructuring and investment in critical training could not escape the tensions in the New Washington Consensus. Thus, its vision for a community partnership that centered the community’s agency proved difficult to achieve in practice. In their meeting minutes, SEDG volunteers expressed wanting to establish collective ownership of projects by “allowing” a community to “determine their own burdens and decide how to ameliorate them.”¹¹ To this end, members of the Ghanaian NGO and W&M students completed “needs-assessment” interviews with five communities to choose one partner, asking questions such as: “What kind of challenges are you facing? How would you resolve those challenges? What would you prioritize?”. Interviewing the community to seek out “self-determined” needs and focusing on capacity building seemed on its surface to reject the donor–recipient relationships of conventional models the students had learned to critique. Yet students from the global North choosing the community most “deserving” of a partnership challenged the creation of a horizontal relationship from the outset. Moreover, the institutional conditions under which SEDG operated led the organization to choose a community on terms that their critical training had warned them against. The students interviewed members of five communities and selected a rural area in the Volta region that was home to approximately 900 individuals. The needs assessment directed students to partner with a community that had a problem—access to clean water—that students could feasibly solve given their institutional constraints. The students were limited to projects that could be completed over their short breaks from university and financed through fundraising. Building a public latrine to keep surrounding rivers clean and to improve public health was the type of problem they could tackle. The students signed a contract with elders of the community that stated, “If the [SEDG] team could raise *X* amount of money, then [the community] would organize the labor. They had various masons and carpenters in their community that would come and help build” (Nichole). Despite the aspiration to establish an MBP, the relationship began as largely transactional, reflecting the “return on investment mindset” of the New Washington Consensus, which aims to integrate “populations into the ethos of an entrepreneurial and individually accountable global capitalist society” (Mitchell and Sparke 2015:728; see also Reid-Henry 2014).

Nonetheless, the community welcomed the students’ work, and the first project was followed by a second latrine project at the primary school. The students recognized the impact these projects had on the community. Margo called the sanitation work “probably

the most impactful, because from year to year we did see that there were fewer incidences of water-borne illnesses.” Kim also noted the significance of the sanitation work:

We heard about the cholera outbreak in so many surrounding communities and how it didn't touch [the community]. I thought that was just such a testament to the work that SEDG has put in, because without maybe the bathrooms it's very likely that cholera would have touched their village too. I feel like I was part of something that could have saved a lot of people's lives.

According to the Queen Mother, a leader in the community, when national health workers visited the community to investigate the cholera outbreak, they were surprised not to find a single case and attributed this to the two public latrines.

Despite this seeming success, the students felt strongly that these initial projects fell short of the organization's moral vision. This was not yet the transformational partnership they aspired to. Indeed, the student volunteers framed these projects as interim steps toward the organization's broader aspirations. The volunteers viewed their primary work to be ethnographic research, with a plan of interviewing every adult in the community and developing a “sustainable” project based on the data from these interviews. The organization's meeting minutes explained their view that “the capacity for collective action comes from shared understanding about the nature of the problem,” and the research would help ascertain this shared understanding.¹² In the meantime, they completed the aforementioned projects as a part of what they considered “unsustainable yearly offerings.”¹³ SEDG students thought these short-term projects would build community trust as they worked to identify an “ultimate” project to fulfill their moral goals. The students saw the legitimacy of their organization as lying in this quest to go beyond Band-Aid solutions. In the early years, this generated great commitment from students, who saw themselves as on the cusp of identifying the project that would serve that larger purpose.

FROM THE QUEST FOR A REAL SOLUTION, TO DEMISE

During the first four years of the organization, W&M students completed several technical projects as they continued to chase the ghost of a “sustainable” project. While new students joined the organization and others graduated and left, the critical anxieties remained, as did the continual efforts to restructure the organization in the hope that they would finally get it right. A new set of leaders tried again to institute a more theoretically driven training and felt, as other leaders had before them, that they were better prepared to address their positionality as volunteers from the global North. They facilitated more frequent meetings for members and created a new training curriculum that engaged the colonial history of Ghana and its connections with the United States, as well as topics like global racism, colorism, capitalism, and neo-colonialism.¹⁴ The group also attempted to create new organizational procedures to address the volunteer turnover inherent in a student-led organization and the challenges it created for their partner NGO and for their community partnership. Margo, for example, tried to describe this

process of training new students each year from the Ghanaian NGO's perspective: "There are new leaders every year, and [the head of the NGO] has to build that rapport again, and explain everything to them, and that takes a lot of time and energy." Thus, in a 2013 "redirection" meeting it was suggested that students commit in their freshman year to participate for four years, which was later amended to two, although there is no evidence the rule was ever enforced.¹⁵ Finally, the group kept extensive documentation of their work, their meetings, and their communications with the hope that building a stronger institutional memory would prevent the organization from, as Emily put it, making the same "mistakes that we made in the past."

Despite these efforts to build the organization's moral legitimacy, the students' critical anxieties persisted. With time, fewer students agreed to participate. As Emily explained, "There weren't enough students who cared enough to keep organizing to make it happen, with the time and energy that we actually devoted to it." In 2013, 15 students participated in SEDG. Although we do not have an exact number before 2013, we know it was more than 15. In an email to the team, the head of the NGO noted that there were fewer volunteers in 2013 than the previous year and that community members worried if they had offended the 2012 team. And student numbers continued to dwindle, with just 10 students in 2016, nine in 2017, and eight in 2018, the last year that SEDG operated.

The cycling tensions around the organization's moral legitimacy finally came to a head in 2018. The first few projects—the two latrines and then refurbishing a maternity ward—had been feasible for the student-led organization. Volunteers' annual visits, with intermittent help from community members throughout the year, were enough to complete these projects. However, the next project identified was a six-classroom school building that would take more time, resources, and labor. This project also stretched the fundraising capacity of the volunteers. In 2018, the cost for the entire trip was about USD 2,300 per volunteer, compared to about USD 1,000 to 1,300 in previous years.¹⁶ The students wrote grants, applied for scholarships, organized events, and managed GoFundMe pages in their attempts to raise funds. Moreover, the technical complexity of the project far outstripped the students' skills and forced them to be more dependent on the community's time and its expertise in carpentry and masonry. Before their arrival in Ghana in 2018, volunteers thought community members had already laid cement for the school and completed the roof, leaving only the final touches of windows, doors, and paint. But this turned out not to be true. Also, an administrative issue delayed the arrival of funds, so the final supplies for the school building could not be purchased until a week after the volunteers had left Ghana. Ultimately, the students left this project incomplete.

On their return home, the disappointment of a seemingly failed trip, paired with their persistent critical anxieties, led them to question more deeply the organization's legitimacy. Some volunteers wondered if simply donating to the community was a better use of time and resources. Meredith was clearly angry when she explained, "I'd rather just would have donated money. Why did I spend all this money for plane tickets, for vaccinations, for malaria pills to be here for only three weeks, which is not a long span of time, to not see our goal accomplished?"

This echoed concerns raised by earlier volunteers, like Adam, who worked with SMAG from 2008 to 2011:

You could have paid a few hundred dollars, hired people in the local community and put that money into the local economy and run the same clinics, and the amount of money we spent on stuff like plane tickets and things like that, you could have used that to run the clinics for a month instead of eight days.

With these significant questions about the organization's moral legitimacy, group leaders faced a difficult decision as they began to plan for SEDG's 2019 trip. During the 2018 trip, volunteers interviewed two new communities and had planned to enter a new partnership with one on their return to Ghana. However, after the failed 2018 trip, volunteers were reluctant to move to a new community without assessing the program and creating a plan to avoid past mistakes. This critical anxiety fueled concerns of moral illegitimacy: how could they start a new project with methods they knew were not ideal? Rather than continue and claim success in terms created by development discourse (Ferguson 1990), student volunteers chose to suspend the program indefinitely.

ANXIETY AND LEGITIMACY

The students' critical and neoliberal anxieties both played a role in the decision to suspend the organization and their efforts to make sense of its demise. The interviewees who participated in the 2017 and 2018 trips almost uniformly displayed neoliberal anxieties as they called into question SEDG's legitimacy. They critiqued themselves and the organization for not being able to overcome common pitfalls of past development models, particularly the perception that they had made the community "dependent" on SEDG's time, skills, and resources. Mia's response to the question, "why did we not return?" illuminated these neoliberal anxieties: "We were really trying to make it be the most sustainable project. But it is disheartening if you go and you see that, like, 'Oh, they're just waiting until we get here to start it up again'." Like many others, Kim had the same concern:

I really am not even sure we should have been in that village, because I think it almost goes exactly against what SEDG tries to do: *making them not be able to work on their own*. Because I think the biggest way that I saw that clearly was that when we got there, they really had hardly worked on the school. . . . And that, to me, is a reflection of, okay, we really haven't necessarily *passed on the skills* that they needed to continue it, or the confidence, because they just think that we're going to keep coming back and doing it. So, I think it's definitely a *mixture of their fault and, and SEDG's fault* for that. But it's definitely hard when you're so well intentioned to see that these people who still need and want your help so badly aren't going to be able to receive it in the future.
(emphasis added)

Kim refers to the skills and confidence needed to complete the school building, but she does not mention that it was not the students but the community members—whose numbers include carpenters and masons—who had the expertise and training to

construct an edifice. Kim believes that the community shares culpability with SEDG because of their failure to “buy into” the projects of a development organization. Repeated studies have found little or no empirical evidence that communities in the South actually demonstrate dependency, or a lack of motivation or initiative to work in favor of reliance on donors (Kaler and Parkins 2015); yet the students’ critical training did not dislodge these neoliberal assumptions.

Kim was not alone in her belief that SEDG’s work was a disservice as much as a service. Mia also worried the project was detrimental to the community’s “agency” and “capacity.”

I think they became too dependent, definitely. And especially because we had been there for so long, I feel like if we had been there for four years or max five years, they could have *conceived of a world without us there*. . . . In the long term they’re going to have to figure out how to have their own *agency* and organize themselves to get things done, rather than just having somebody come from above with money that’s like, “Oh, this is how you can do it.” (emphasis added)

This is not a critique of voluntourism, it is a critique of people in the global South, who are perceived as abject recipients. The idea that an autonomous, self-sustaining community with a history much deeper than the eight years of the SEDG partnership could not “conceive of a world without us there” reflects deep-seated neoliberal assumptions that critical training had not shaken loose.

However, the students’ critical anxieties also played an important role in the demise of the organization, as some students privileged an indictment of themselves and the organization over that of the community. Dejectedly, Kim admitted what other volunteers said they feared: “We didn’t change anything in a real, material, significant way.” Emily raised concerns that, if the organization persisted, “we would continue perpetuating problematic systems and making the same mistakes we’ve had in the past that we didn’t feel like it was an ethical decision to continue doing that.” Alternative breaks claim to transcend voluntourism as an industry that inherently caters to volunteer needs and interests. Students found this claim to the moral high ground disingenuous. Margo summed it up: “I think the purpose really was more of the student leadership and development than it was the actual community development work that we did.”

Many students mentioned the personal benefits they experienced to justify their participation despite what they saw as the organization’s—and the community’s—failure. Sallie argues that working in Ghana brought her to a level of understanding that would not have been possible without SEDG: “I had a ‘come-to’ moment of what my role as a White woman in international development is or isn’t, in a way no other experience had led me to think about.” Julia echoed the “neoliberal governmentality” of voluntourism that Sin, Oakes, and Mostafanezhad (2015) described as she felt the need to weigh the personal benefits of participation against the potential harm to the community: “I realize that it functioned into this wider problematic system. I also know that it taught me so much and it gave me so much perspective and it showed me what I want to do in life.” However, at least some of the students recognized that this consciousness-raising

amounted to students using communities in the global South as a training ground for personal development. As Emily put it, “It’s exploitation for your own educational purpose.”

Some students’ critical anxieties also led them to critique the idea, embedded in international volunteering, that MBPs can foster equitable relationships in a world of deep power imbalances. Sallie, for instance, raised the concern of power differentials when attempting to reach the unattainable goal of MBPs: “I don’t know if, in reality, a truly mutually beneficial partnership can exist between parties that come from different power backgrounds.” Margo concurs:

I don’t know if a mutually beneficial partnership is what we should be going for. The goal should be of equity [not equality]. In an ideal world, community partners and communities should get more from the experience because they’re going out of their way to invite students into their world. Parties getting mutual benefit, to me, is like both parties getting the same amount of capital.

Margo points out that students gain capital from the interaction that can be leveraged for future benefits and questions the idea that students’ benefits should equal—let alone outweigh—those gained by the community. Likewise, Emily saw power dynamics as a central issue that SEDG could not overcome:

I was having a really hard time grappling with the *ethical issues* of what it means to be a White, privileged, undergrad student who’s not qualified to be working internationally. It created a power dynamic that we didn’t necessarily feel comfortable in navigating. I never wanted to participate in a mission trip or, like, just a voluntourism trip. And to be honest, at this point that’s what it felt like. And so, I am *disappointed* that I could have participated in something that did not line up with my values. (emphasis added)

These critical and neoliberal anxieties contributed to the students’ indictment of SEDG’s moral legitimacy and the decision to suspend the organization’s work indefinitely.

Critical anxieties also led some students to question the organization’s pragmatic legitimacy. The purpose of an alternative break is to create a society of “active citizens.” International service should inspire greater student interest and involvement, potentially making “development” or service part of their career. For many participants this was the case; at least six of the 16 respondents made a long-term commitment to international service following their participation in SEDG. However, other students rejected these credentials of global citizenship and their plans to pursue careers in international development. Eight respondents expressed the desire to focus their future work on their local communities, citing “disillusioning” experiences with SEDG as the primary reason for this shift. Volunteers—even those with majors such as international relations—listed two main reasons for eschewing future international service work: fear that their gap in knowledge and cultural understanding yawned too wide when working with communities in different countries; and concern that the gap in relative privilege made equitable

social justice work feel too difficult, if not impossible, given the pre-existing power imbalances.

Meredith had hoped that participation in SMAG would have a “profound impact” on her life, but instead found that “it really didn’t.” She described voluntourism as cultural imperialism and decided it is “better to shy away from all of that.” Molly and Liz explained that after working in Ghana, they felt more drawn to domestic service and career opportunities because they had more context and less fear of “messing up.” As Liz put it,

I was kind of *disenchanted* with what it meant to have an international volunteer-led trip. I felt more drawn to serving a community that I felt like I just had more *cultural competency*, I guess. I felt like my presence [in the United States] doesn’t mess up as many things. If international service is your calling and your dream, absolutely go for it. I thought it was mine, and then [SMAG] was kind of a wake-up call to “oh, I don’t think it is.” (emphasis added)

Volunteers were trained on the concept of cultural humility, but deeply understanding its importance also scared them away from working abroad. As Kim explained: “Just thinking about my career . . . prior to that experience I was very set on wanting to work abroad. And as much as I loved the experience, it really kind of solidified that I actually don’t want to work abroad.” Several students avoided international development work following graduation, but found relevance in the skills of global citizenship they developed through SEDG. Molly explained that while she is interested in global health, she is currently leaning toward work in the United States. She felt that many of the “lessons carry over,” as she learned “how to respectfully inquire about the community and get to know patients and have some of that cultural humility,” especially in diverse areas and cities she does not live in.

Others, however, rejected the idea that they had developed useful credentials in global citizenship. After graduating, Sallie had difficulty finding work she felt comfortable doing: “I was really struggling, because it kind of left me reeling, like I clearly wasn’t prepared, and I don’t know if this is the kind of work that I feel comfortable doing.” Emily had the same worry; after the program ended, she could not imagine herself doing international service work. “I was more interested in working domestically and focusing on social justice issues that were close to home.” Many students’ critical anxieties left them wary of international partnerships of any kind.

CONCLUSION

International student volunteering has mirrored trends in the broader development industry: despite decades of critique it persists, reinventing itself to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of donors. However, its latest incarnation in RIVOs, which root their legitimacy in “alternative” approaches and MBPs, may destabilize this cycle of critique and reinvention. Students’ experiences with RIVOs embody the tension inherent in the New Washington Consensus: volunteers are critical of past development models *and* feel

individually empowered to fix past mistakes. Their critiques of development are encouraged and nurtured in this model, creating new dynamics that may lead to organizational demise.

The case of SEDG sheds light on the paradox of these programs. Students are trained to believe that they can forge equitable relationships with, and achieve transformational change in, communities in the global South. And yet the institutional conditions under which they operate make these aspirations impossible. Research on the development industry more broadly suggests that such organizations nonetheless persist as they come to define their success in quantifiable terms constructed by the development discourse (Apthorpe 2011; Ferguson 1990), and research on student volunteers emphasizes the incentives for continued participation (Lyons et al. 2012; Pearce and Coghlan 2008). However, by bringing together research on the affective and emotive experiences of student volunteers with Suchman's (1995) work on organizational legitimacy, we reveal that alternative organizational trajectories are possible. As students in RIVOs grapple with both critical and neoliberal anxieties, they may indict the moral legitimacy of the organization and choose organizational demise.

Indeed, neoliberal anxieties led some students to blame the community for the organization's failure. While many of these students had a vague understanding of the structural issues contributing to their failure, alternative break discourse allowed them to understand critiques of voluntourism enough to seek equity in community engagement. When they could not find it, they rejected the organization and found it morally illegitimate. For others, critical anxieties were paramount. These volunteers came to develop a deeper understanding of the structural issues at the root of the organization's failure and could not in good conscience continue their work. Indeed, despite its perceived failings, SEDG in many ways achieved its underlying goal of producing cohorts of critical volunteers. Many respondents felt they learned important lessons that they will carry with them in future careers as development and public health practitioners. However, they also questioned whether these lessons were learned at the expense of communities in the global South. Was more harm done than good?

These findings suggest that the affective and emotive experiences of student volunteers may have broader ripple effects within the New Washington Consensus and reflect growing tensions in ethical international development practice and research (Keahey 2020). SEDG students came to embody the tensions of—and challenge—the New Washington Consensus, and we would expect professionals in the development industry more broadly to experience some similar neoliberal and critical anxieties. While this is an important avenue for future research, the distinct institutional conditions of student-based organizations may make students more likely to act on critical views than professionals in conventional development organizations. As Fechter (2012:1394–95) notes, development professionals who “make personal doubts and critical views of aid public” risk “jeopardising their jobs” and provoking “hostile reaction[s],” demonstrating “how contested professional reputations of organisations and individuals in this field can be.” “Venting professional misgivings” is only accepted if one's views “give credence to policy

recommendations which, while critical of existing approaches, do not fundamentally question the joint aid endeavour.”

Beyond demonstrating demise as a possible trajectory for student volunteer organizations, our research also has broader implications for students’ pursuit of careers in international development. SEDG met the criteria for pragmatic legitimacy under the terms of the conventional development discourse, fulfilling students’ claims on global citizenship. Yet many found they no longer wished for this neoliberal accreditation. These students rejected the legitimacy of the organization on both moral and pragmatic grounds. Moreover, in subsequent years they shifted their career pursuits from international to domestic issues.

What do we make of these volunteers’ retreat from the international arena following their service? Are students simply retreating into the safety and comfort of what they think, perhaps erroneously, will be less challenging, domestic encounters? Does developing a critical perspective actually lead to fewer global connections and fewer efforts to build cross-cultural understanding? These volunteers expressed a desire to return to local service because they felt they could more readily navigate power imbalances and cultural gaps on familiar territory. But they are also aware that while international service challenged them in unexpected ways, similar complex questions await them in communities closer to home. This suggests that volunteers who choose domestic service are not avoiding the nuance of their positionality and privilege per se, but they do run the risk of simply reproducing short-term, grant-funded, technical solutions in domestic communities and having their goals for transformational change equally frustrated. Rather than simply shifting the geography of their development work, what is required is a shift toward demanding political and structural change by following the leadership of communities in the global South, such as those demanding reparations for slavery and colonialism. As Ferguson (1994:181) clearly put it, “For Westerners, one of the most important forms of engagement is simply the political participation in one’s own society that is appropriate to any citizen. This is, perhaps, particularly true for citizens of a country like the US, where one of the most important jobs for ‘experts’ is combating imperialist policies.”

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NOTES

1. This is a pseudonym.
2. This is a pseudonym.
3. SMAG, 2012, ‘Meeting II.’
4. SEDG, 2014, ‘Precepts and Shared Beliefs.’
5. SMAG, 2011, ‘Meetings with [W&M professor].’

6. SMAG, 2011, 'Meetings with [W&M professor].'
7. SEDG, 2014, 'Precepts and Shared Beliefs.'
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. SMAG, 2011, 'Meetings with [W&M professor].'
12. SMAG, 2011, 'Meetings with [W&M professor].'
13. SMAG, 2012, 'Meeting 7.'
14. SEDG, 2018, 'Meetings 2017-18.'
15. SMAG, 2013, 'SMAG Redirection Meeting'
16. SEDG, 2018, 'SEDG Budget 4/20'; SMAG, 2013, 'Budget.'

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