

Limitations of civic service: critical perspectives

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Abstract Community, national, and international service policies and programs exist worldwide. Anecdotally, their prevalence has increased dramatically in recent years. Their proliferation indicates a tacit presumption of their positive nature. While acknowledging the benefits of these programs, we call attention to the possible limitations of service, including elitism, state interests, and imperialism. We emphasize implications for policy, practice, and research.

Introduction

In large measure, attention to the role of the voluntary sector in community development is just emerging as an area of practice and research. Community development projects today are characterized by increasing support for the participation of local, national, and international volunteers in programming. The importance of volunteers' roles in development is reflected in the celebration of 2001 as the 'Year of the Volunteer' by the United Nations. Participation of the public in the activities of the voluntary sector is now tied to the notion of active citizenship (Poppo and Redmond, 2000), as distinguished from traditional accounts of citizenship limited to the realm of the polity (Shaw and Martin, 2000). Voluntary sector participation reflects societal systems of care and governance (Menon, McBride, and Sherraden, 2003). While volunteerism may be informal, not necessarily occurring through programs, there are structured programs for volunteer involvement in community development known as 'civic service'.

Civic service can be defined as 'an organized period of substantial engagement and contribution to the local, national, or world community, recognized and valued by society, with minimal monetary compensation to the participant' (Sherraden, 2001b, pp. 2). This definition implies that

civic service is different from occasional volunteering. Civic service offers distinct roles for volunteers that are intensive and long-term, which are implemented through formal programs operated by organizations or governments (Tang, McBride, and Sherraden, 2003). Most service programs have, as their goals, the social and economic development of communities, from construction of watersheds, trails, and housing to literacy education, preventative medical care, and sustainable agricultural practices (Eberly and Sherraden, 1990; McBride, Sherraden, Benitez and Johnson, 2004).

Service programs differ by the type of organizational sponsor, the specific activities undertaken by the volunteers, and the scope of activity. They can be local, national, international, or transnational in scope, and targeted toward volunteers who are younger, older, of faith, or in school. Notable examples include the United Nations Volunteers, Voluntary Service Overseas, European Voluntary Service scheme, Jesuit Volunteer Corps, Mexico's *Servicio Sociale*, Nigeria's National Youth Service Corps, and the United States' Peace Corps and AmeriCorps. Community, national, and international service may have very different motives depending on the social, economic, and political context in which they are developed and implemented. Individual programs are incredibly diverse. However, we identify three overarching, overt, and well-placed objectives for such programs; they engage in needed public work, promote social justice, and create opportunities that advance cross-cultural understanding and active citizenship through interaction among the volunteers and host communities.

Civic service research has primarily focused on the outcomes for the volunteers or the immediate outcomes for hosts and host communities. For the volunteers, outcomes may include decreased isolation, improved mental health and self-esteem, increased tolerance and cross-group understanding, enhanced work skills, advanced educational achievement, and expanded career options (Education Commission of the States, 1999; Mohan, 1994; Perry and Thomson, 2004; Wilson and Musick, 1999). Service is believed to instill a sense of civic responsibility and citizenship, teach cooperation and collaboration, and increase volunteers' engagement in political life (Eberly and Sherraden, 1990; Education Commission of the States, 1999; Flanagan, Bowes, Jonsson, Csapo, and Sheblanova, 1998; Funk, 1998; McBride, Lombe, Tang, Sherraden, and Benitez, 2003; Perry and Katula, 2001; Smith, 1999). At the community level, service may also address a range of issues, including unemployment, health problems, natural disasters, crime, and inadequate schools. In Mexico, for example, university graduates and medical students participate in service activities in rural areas from six months to two years under the civic service program, *Servicio Sociale*, bringing skills and resources to address development issues (Sherraden and Sherraden, 1990).

Civic service is indeed a fairly recent phenomenon worldwide, emerging with force in the last four decades (McBride *et al.*, 2004). But even given this span of time, service research remains predominately anecdotal and descriptive. Service programs tend to be '... judged on their intentions, not their outcomes' (Mohan, 1994, p. 264). There are few rigorous, experimental studies (Grantmaker Forum on Community and National Service, 2000; Perry and Imperial, 2001; Perry and Thomson, 2004) and scant definitive evidence of the benefits or harms of service. Existing research lacks operationalization, breadth, and consideration of possible negative outcomes (McBride *et al.*, 2003; Tang *et al.*, 2003).

For example, scholars have not clearly identified the elements of service, e.g. compulsory nature, training, or compensation and postulated their potential effects on the volunteers or the hosts. Civic service research has also focused on service learning and national service to the exclusion of other types of service such as international service (Eberly and Sherraden, 1990; Education Commission of the States, 1999; Evers, 1990; Grantmaker Forum on Community and National Service, 2000; Mohan, 1994; Perry and Imperial, 2001; Roux, 1991; Sherraden, 2001a). Moreover, despite the rhetoric regarding the possible community and societal effects of service, research focuses primarily on individual-level outcomes at the attitudinal level of both the volunteers and the hosts (Grantmaker Forum, 2000; McBride *et al.*, 2003; Perry and Thomson, 2004). Finally, service research is characterized by success bias (Perry and Thomson, 2004). Perry and Thomson (2004) found in a review of more than 100 civic service studies that regardless of the level of analysis or outcomes under examination, 85% of the studies indicate positive results.

Although there are undoubtedly positive outcomes of civic service, the possible negative outcomes remain largely unexplored. The civic service field labors with attention to limitations and possible harms. Overall, research has not reached the objective balance that is necessary to assess the utility and impact of service around the world. As a small step toward correcting this imbalance, we explore some of the possible limitations of service.

Research on civic service has neglected to examine the power relationships and the resulting inequality between volunteers, hosts, and sponsors (Bandow, 1990; Cobbs, 1996; Evers, 1990; Mohan, 1994). Attention to power dynamics brings to light crucial some questions. Who has the opportunity to participate in service programs? Who benefits from the service programs? Do the hosts and host communities have a choice in program design and implementation as well as their role in the process? Do the services provided build the capacities of the host communities? Across all cultures, issues of inequality and discrimination are central to

the relationships between individuals, between individuals and governments, and between governments. Drawing upon insights from other areas of study, such as anthropology (Said, 1978), development (Blaut, 1993; Escobar, 1996; Ferguson, 1990; Pigg, 1993), and education (Education Commission of the States, 1999), we highlight the possible limitations of civic service through a discussion of three interrelated perspectives: elitism, state interests, and imperialism.

Elitism

For the purposes of this paper, we define *elitism* as the power certain members of a society have to make decisions for and dominate others – usually, members of a lower class or minority group. Elitism can lead to controlled and unequal access to resources and opportunities, such as education, wealth, health care, and jobs. Elitism in civic service programs can be unintentional. One source of elitism arises from the very characteristics of volunteers participating in civic service programs. Studies on volunteerism in different countries show that volunteers in civic service programs tend to be more educated and of higher income than average (Brown, 1999; Clotfelter, 1999; Husbands, McKechnie, and Gagnon, 2000). Disadvantaged individuals may find it difficult to engage in intensive, long-term, and uncompensated service programs because the eligibility criteria and structure of the experience limit participation.

Elitism in civic service programs brings to light the paradox of efficiency. Specifically, studies about the impact of service find that it is most effective when volunteers are trained and have higher education (Bowers, 1995; Education Commission of the States, 1999). However, if service programs choose to maximize their efficiency by selecting qualified participants, they run the risk of being inequitable in terms of who has access. This may be the case in South Africa, for example, where skill-based service has been criticized as elitist (Roux, 1991).

Civic service programs can also be intentionally elitist through their explicit focus on the volunteers and the neglect of the hosts or hosts communities, which may be especially true in the case of youth service (Flanagan *et al.*, 1998; Sherraden and Eberly, 1982). The neglect of the inherent power differential between the participants runs the risks of demeaning the host communities, imposing a dominant ideology on disadvantaged individuals and perpetuating oppressive systems. This raises questions about international service programs and, in particular, about paid cross-cultural ‘service-vacation’ experiences (McBride and Daftary, 2005; Simpson, 2004). There has been little focus on the outcomes for the hosts and host communities or on the efficacy of the various interventions that are

implemented by the volunteers. Former Peace Corps volunteers have reported gaining and learning more than they gave or served (Amin, 1999). Unequal power dynamics may be exacerbated when the intended purpose of the program is to create an appreciation of how the poor live and the volunteers pay for that experience.

Implied in this discussion of elitism is the notion of limited choices that are available to host communities. It is important to inquire if the hosts and their communities are engaged actively in service programs, especially in the identification of needed services. One of the arguments in favor of service is that it promotes cultural integration (Iyizoba, 1982; Omo-Abu, 1997). The risk of focusing on integration, however, is that minorities are often pressured to assimilate for the sake of social conformity (Pigg, 1993). As such, service programs may threaten the pluralism that is the strength of many communities (Neuhaus, 1990). Furthermore, Evers (1990) raises the question whether people can 'voluntarily decide matters if they depend for their economic survival on others with more resources' (paraphrasing Etzioni, p. xxxviii).

One criticism of service is that it displaces natural systems of care rather than bolstering the capacity of the host communities (Ehrichs, 2002; McKnight, 1995). The question then becomes whether or not the implemented changes are sustainable. A study of the benefits of AmeriCorps suggests that the positive impact may be short-term and contingent upon the volunteers' continued work (Thomson and Perry, 1998). The risk is that service programs merely create or even increase dependency on volunteers and displace existing support systems, thus, potentially perpetuating rather than addressing unequal power and access to resources (Ehrichs, 2002).

State interests

Most civic service programs have a variety of stakeholders at different levels – individual and institutional. The role of governments and their agents becomes important, especially in the context of government-sponsored service programs such as national service. Research on service has not given particular attention to salient issues such as the loss of individual rights, the limits of mandatory service, dangers of politicization, and the resulting implications for democracy in societies.

While service programs overall may risk reinforcing unequal power dynamics between volunteers and host communities, government-sponsored and government-mandated programs may undermine the rights of volunteers and the host communities in favor of a political agenda. Government promotion of state interests is linked to elitism in so

far as decision-making is often done by a select few, but national service programs may trigger further concerns. National service can resemble the military draft, with a combination of civic and military conscription or governmental promotion of voluntary civic service (Evers, 1990).

Mandatory service programs are seen as interfering with the free market system and limiting individual rights and choices (Oi, 1990). Some scholars argue that mandatory service programs permit governments to acquire labor at less than its market value, which in turn lowers the efficiency and productivity of the workforce (Bandow, 1990; Oi, 1990). While acknowledging the potential of increasing societal participation through service programs, scholars have also cautioned against the potential use of volunteers as 'unpaid labor' (Kenny, 2002; Popple and Redmond, 2000). Mandatory national service programs are often hailed as promoting citizenship and national integrity. However, evaluations of national service programs have questioned the service–citizenship linkage. In a recent evaluation of the Nigerian National Youth Service Corps program, Obadare (2005) found that socio-political environments have a larger role to play in promoting citizenship than service programs *per se*. This research also illustrates the potential for elite interests in national service programs masquerading as state interests.

The establishment of mandatory service programs highlights the debate between individual rights and community rights. Opponents say that eroding individual freedom through mandatory service is similar to enforced obligation to the state, which is demanded by totalitarian regimes (Epstein, 2002). Obadare (2005) argues that in states, where citizens have few rights, there should not be enforced responsibility. Another point of contention is whether or not disadvantaged individuals should be required to serve in order to receive state benefits. While advocates of this policy say that it is a way of meriting assistance rather than treating it as an entitlement, opponents say that it unfairly increases the burdens of citizens with disadvantages (Evers, 1990; Mohan, 1994).

Excessive control of service programs by governments can curtail genuine involvement of citizens in civic life. Contrary to the claim that service will strengthen the moral fiber of the volunteers, critics question the role of the government in determining and defining proper moral conduct (Evers, 1990). Furthermore, they question whether mandating that people care about their communities will automatically corrupt the nature and goal of service (Mohan, 1994). Concerns are also raised about the government's ability to decide what needs are not being met, how to respond to those needs, and what training is needed by volunteers (Evers, 1990).

The larger socio-political contexts in which service programs emerge need investigation. Service programs implemented under government

control may fall prey to politicization and a universal approach to unique, local social problems (Obadare, 2005; Yadama and Messerschmidt, 2004). Yadama and Messerschmidt (2004) in their analysis of the Nepal Development Service (NDS) point to the pitfalls of politicization of civic service and the resulting implications for fostering democratic governance in communities. By moving service from the private to the public realm, cultural practices are co-opted by the government and they lose their consensual nature (Said, 1978). Rather than promoting civic engagement and a healthy democracy, which rely on questioning and critical thinking, service may depoliticize issues and teach conformity to social norms (McKnight, 1995; Mohan, 1994).

Imperialism

Just as governments may use mandatory service to tighten control over citizens, transnational and international service programs have been criticized for promoting their social, economic, and political gains in other countries. Some claim that this is a manifestation of imperialism, be it cultural or economic. In the past two decades, an increasing number of academics have criticized the field of 'development' for its imperialistic tendencies (Blaut, 1993; Ehrichs, 2002; Escobar, 1996; Ferguson, 1990; Mudimbe, 1997; Pigg, 1993). While these criticisms may not always apply to service programs and activities, international service is often used as a strategy for development goals.

Critics argue that most development programs are steeped in colonial attitudes, which emphasize 'Eurocentric diffusionism' (Blaut, 1993). Simply stated, this perspective perpetuates the notion that western methodologies are not only different but also superior to local technologies and knowledge. One can argue that this erstwhile ideology still continues in the contemporary service programs. Specifically, by limiting access to civic service programs to those individuals with higher skills or training and by employing these individuals in resource-poor communities, service programs can potentially perpetuate the same imperialistic stereotypes.

Volunteer activities have also been used to promote foreign policy goals. During the Cold War, for example, Western countries' volunteerism was seen as a way of gaining allegiance from neutral countries. The Peace Corps was a strategy of the post-World War II period for 'making friends for America in the Third World' (Cobbs, 1996, p. 80). The Peace Corps was developed as a complement to U.S. war efforts by showing what the country stood for, not just what it stood against. In order to spread pro-Western attitudes in the 'third World' countries, idealistic youth were to

live in those countries, to teach English, agriculture, and public health, and to spread Western ideals of democracy and freedom.

International service has also been used to strengthen national policies of both sender and host nations. As a foreign policy tool, it helps foster a sense of collective identity and pride, thereby increasing consensus over national goals. In post-World War II Europe, for example, international volunteerism gained support and became a political strategy for unifying both the detractors of colonialism and those who sought to maintain colonial ties. In the Netherlands, ex-colonial administrators actually became volunteer coordinators in their former colonies (Cobbs, 1996). In addition, just as colonialism created social divisions within colonized countries, development depoliticizes and thus reinforces the power of the ruling elite by representing the state as a benign dispenser of services, removed from the social problems it is intended to solve (Ferguson, 1990).

Current international and transnational service programs continue to run the risk of perpetuating the cultural, political, and economic hegemony of 'First World' over 'Third World' countries, spreading notions of development and underdevelopment. While the covert and sometimes, overt intent of development is economic growth, cultural hegemony is both potentially an outcome of economic growth and a way of promoting it. For example, Pigg (1993) shows how development activities in Nepal shaped the way villagers viewed themselves and internalized the notions of being underdeveloped, while at the same time reinforcing the caste divisions inherent to Nepali culture. The host communities may learn to view themselves as poor and ignorant (Pigg, 1993), and may gain much less than the volunteers.

In addition, because the volunteers often do not know the language or the culture, they typically rely on westernized elite to represent the host country and identify its problems (Cohn and Wood, 1985). Service may consequently benefit the privileged more than the underserved populations (Ehrichs, 2002). Moreover, international service opportunities are often advertised as a cheap way of traveling and seeing the world – a form of tourism. While this can help the local economy, it may be ineffectual in addressing a community's social and economic problems.

Addressing limitations: implications for policy, practice, and research

As civic service programs continue to emerge globally, practitioners, policymakers, and scholars should be cognizant of the potentials as well as the limitations of civic service programs, which may reflect elitism, state interests, and imperialism. At the beginning of this article, we

suggested that the positive goals of service include completion of needed public work, promotion of social justice, and advancement of cross-cultural understanding and active citizenship. In light of the range of limitations addressed in this article and given these goals, we outline implications for mandatory service, inclusion, and effective practice.

Mandatory service and long-term effects

Local, state, and national policies that mandate service participation should be open to public scrutiny and input. This includes service-learning programs at the primary, secondary, and post-secondary levels that require community service of students for course-credit and graduation. Especially in times of perceived national crisis or patriotic fervor, when policy excesses are common, policymakers can aim to limit potentially oppressive and exploitative features of service. Programs and policies that permit freedom of choice may lead to more sustainable outcomes (Sen, 1999). Obadare (2005) proffers that required service may undermine the goal of active citizenship with individuals joining in collective action. These negative effects may be experienced by the volunteers as well as the host communities who perhaps did not invite the service program or were coerced into the implementation of an activity, e.g. building of a community center when water wells were needed.

Program development and implementation: Inclusion of host communities

Thoughtful, informed program development is crucial to ensure the achievement of benefits and amelioration of negative effects. Community-driven models of program development emphasize the inclusion of host communities, including sponsoring organizations and community participants. As a social justice issue, participatory planning and implementation may lessen power differentials by empowering host communities (Chambers, 1997; Ehrichs, 2002; McKnight, 1995). Through this process, program models can reflect intended outcomes for both volunteers and hosts. This approach to program development is relevant for all types of service.

Identification and examination of the population(s) targeted to serve is an integral part of program development. There may be differences between who is targeted to serve and who is able to serve. What are the potential barriers (social, economic, and physical) that limit participation in service programs? Incentives and compensation can be structured such that service programs are more inclusive (McBride *et al.*, 2004). AmeriCorps in the United States is one example. This program recruits volunteers from disadvantaged circumstances who receive supports for role performance, e.g. insurance, child care, and limited housing, and may benefit from the

educational awards given at the end of the service term (Abt Associates, 2004). Innovation is required for the inclusion of marginal populations in civic service. In Europe, there has been interest and expansion of 'on-line' volunteering, which may offer greater potential for those with physical disabilities. It is important, however, that attempts to be inclusive do not lead to stigmatization.

Research on effective 'service'

This article has focused on the structure of service activity as it affects service outcomes. But the 'services' delivered, e.g. tutoring, environmental preservation, disaster response, etc. are just as important as the structure. Across the social sciences, we actually know very little about what services are effective in what contexts; existing knowledge of both should be merged for the development of effective programs and policies. It is also important to recognize that formal civic service programs form only one end of the continuum of societal care. Future research can examine the linkages between natural, informal systems of care and governance, and formal civic service programs. Through this, we will gain insight on how to institutionalize civic service better that promotes community involvement and sustainability.

Research on civic service would do well to move away from the traditional focus on program evaluation to theoretically driven studies of both the positive and negative outcomes of civic service. Other foci include short and long-term effects of service in relation to stated goals as well as unanticipated effects of service on both the volunteers and the host communities. By focusing on these areas, the knowledge base on service can become more balanced and credible. Also, assessing the effects of service across different types of programs will advance the civic service field. As in all social science research, when similar patterns emerge in different contexts, the knowledge base and predictability are strengthened.

Development of service process and outcome measures can be informed by qualitative research with individuals and communities that are involved in service. Especially in the early stages of developing a knowledge base, qualitative research, including case studies, focus groups, and in-depth interviewing, is crucial. Ultimately, longitudinal, experimental, or quasi-experimental research will be ideal. Whenever possible, systematic study should be guided by theory and hypothesis testing, and should include assessment of alternative hypotheses (i.e. critical tests).

Conclusion

Civic service can lead to positive social, economic, and political changes in those who serve, as well as those who are hosts and host communities. But

service can also lead to negative changes. As the field develops, a critical eye is warranted to ensure that negative consequences are ameliorated or avoided. This paper has identified possible limitations related to power, exploitation, and government interference. Sensitivity to issues of bias, exclusion, control, and cultural exploitation will be important in service development and implementation. A research agenda that is rigorous, cross-cultural, and critical can help build a balanced knowledge base for more informed decision-making regarding civic service.

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