

Confronting the White Elephant: International Volunteering and Racial (Dis)advantage

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Abstract: *This retrospective study with nine volunteer-sending organizations from six countries assesses how race influences the aid recipients' sense of power and agency of development volunteers. Methods include a combination of 24 structured staff-member interviews, 59 community-member interviews, and 83 quantitative surveys. From the perspective of intended aid recipients, there is a strong association between race and: (i) resources, (ii) knowledge and expertise, and (iii) trust. Practice implications recommend strategies to shift the power balance and to change disempowered racial perceptions, including critical conscious-raising, strengths-based dialogue, and polemic discourse about the mutuality of exchange.*

Keywords: race, resources, volunteering, power, neo-colonialism

Introduction

In historical tradition, the white elephant was a symbol of power and wealth. Despite their high regard, however, white elephants were presented by monarchs in Southeastern Asia to antagonists of the throne. As a revered object, they could not be put to useful work, and often impoverished the recipient with the burden of maintenance and upkeep (Bullen, 2011). While the color of the gift earned special favor, it also presented a difficult burden that was hard for the recipient to reconcile as a blessing or a curse. A shadow of this dilemma obscures the benefit ultimately derived from many forms of international volunteering as a mode of development assistance.

Racial differences are rarely addressed openly in development aid discourse (Kothari, 2006) – leading some scholars to describe the issue as the “elephant in the room” (Crewe and Fernando, 2006), an invisible “blind spot” in international relations (Loftsdóttir, 2009: 4), and “determinedly color-blind” when considering North-South aid relations (White, 2002: 407). Despite a long history of racial tensions in development practice, studies have only recently begun to explore how development institutions reflect and reinforce racialized power relations (Kothari, 2006b).

In this paper, we extend the discussion of race in development discourse by researching international volunteers as actors and implementers of development aid. While previous studies addressing race and development have primarily investigated the influence of race on institutions and structures of global aid, this study feeds the thin body of research investigating the intersection between race and international development volunteerism (see Heron, 2007, Noxolo, 2011). In addition, while the bulk of previous studies tends to rely primarily on Western voices and knowledge, this research explores how perceptions of race are confirmed or contradicted by black “recipients” of aid in Kenya. This study also responds to a call for analyses in postcolonial critique on the intersection of race and international relations to “include responses and commentaries from the third world” (Kothari, 2006: 22). As such, the paper is concerned with understanding how recipients of development aid in Kenya come to view their relations with international helpers.

We begin by asking how historical vestiges of colonialism and contemporary global power structures may help to explain racially symbolized interactions between international volunteers and intended beneficiaries in Kenya. By connecting historical race relations to contemporary interactions, we explore how perceptions of development volunteering as a unidirectional transfer of knowledge and expertise may influence the internalized scripts and roles of both volunteers and community members. We also examine the notion that prolonged and frequent interactions between white volunteers and black community members may reduce racialized stereotypes associated with more remote forms of technical assistant.

Racial Remnants of Colonialism

Contemporary conceptions of race in Kenya reflect the socio-historical vestiges of colonialism. Kenya was formally a British colony from 1895 to 1963, which began a long process of racial discrimination along class lines within the country (Kyle, 1997). White settlers began migrating to Kenya as early as 1902, and by 1930 nearly 30,000 white settlers lived in the Kenyan highlands (Gatheru, 2005). As with most British colonies, the white minority in Kenya was ascribed higher class and status compared to the black majority (Duder, 1993). Consistent with other colonies, binary distinctions that emphasized the civilization of Western powers and the backwardness of the racial and cultural ‘other’ were used to justify exploitation and colonization (Said, 1978). In the colonization of Kenya, these power structures were defined,

differentiated and legitimated by race—where rule was justified “through a racialized discourse that positioned an uncivilized black ‘other’ against a civilized white self” (Kothari, 2006: 11; Said, 1978).

Over the coming few decades, this ascribed status had a major influence on the internal identity and culture of black Kenyans. While the presence of internalized subordination was necessary to the process of successful colonization efforts, it was perpetuated through various social institutions. As Shaw articulated in her writings of Kenyan colonial inscriptions, “Race, social stratification, and economic oppression that are a part of domestic colonialism are major social forces affecting individuals who are carriers and creators of black culture” (1995: 15). Although Kenya has been an independent republic since 1964, the historic construction of racial identities in Kenya finds many parallels in contemporary global relations between international volunteers and host communities.

Neocolonial Aid Relationships and Helping

The historic roots of racial inferiority/superiority may be further perpetuated by contemporary neocolonial aid relationships. Kothari argues that colonial narratives are retold through modern discourse of development, where those in the South come to believe that they have lower capacity for development—augmented by inferior science, technology and resources (2006). This narrative may result in a “colonization of the mind” (Ngũgĩ 1986), which implicitly associates whiteness with progress, power and higher status. As such, racial relations inherent in aid may be symbolic representations for power, wealth, and knowledge or “global relationships of power at the micro level” (Baaz, 2005; Heron, 2007: 8). In return, these racial perceptions likely structure how different parties perceive of themselves and their roles. By the very definition of help and assistance, racialized associations with aid are symbolic expressions of Western superiority (Goudge, 2003). As Palacios notes, “the use of a volunteering—and therefore a helping-language in a global context of inequality and postcolonialism directly relates to a history of Western domination” (Palacios, 2010, p. 864).

Kapoor argues that people in recipient nations come to see themselves in a binary contrast with donors. Donors are seen as generous and kind, whereas recipients are re-created as needy and deficient (Kapoor, 2008). Development volunteers are seen as reservoirs of knowledge and charity. As Noxolo synopsisized following interviews with returned volunteers in the UK, “the moral economy of development volunteering as ‘gifting’ remains anchored in a zero sum game, in which the generous donor nation is contrasted with conspicuously needy recipients” (Noxolo, 2011, p. 221). Indeed, the race of international development volunteers cannot easily be divorced from neocolonial aid relationships. As a result, help provided by white development volunteers can influence aid recipients’ internalized sense of power and agency.

Although this research did not assess the expectations and motivations of international volunteers, we recognize that the role expectations of volunteers may also influence the expectations of intended beneficiaries. One of the top motivations for volunteering abroad is to “make a difference by helping others” (Lough, McBride, & Sherraden, 2009). Language and images used in marketing strategies of volunteer organizations (particularly short-term volunteer tourism) often create visions that reinforce binary representations of Africans as different, exotic, primitive, and in need of help (Caton & Almeida, 2009). In comparison with short-term volunteer tourists as well as technical advisors, development volunteers may be more self-reflective about their motivations—recognizing many self-oriented reasons for volunteering (Noxolo, 2011). However, to the degree that volunteers expect to provide unidirectional assistance, social role theory suggests that intended beneficiaries are likely to accommodate by

adopting behaviors, identities and expectations consistent with role of ‘needy beneficiary’ (Biddle, 1979).

Structuring Race Relations in Development Institutions

Previous studies suggest that perceptions of racial difference may also be tied to the structure and practices of development institutions. While there is not much data on international volunteers globally, 90 percent of volunteers from the U.S. are white, with only 5 percent identifying as black (Lough, 2013). In addition, heads of development agencies are typically expatriates, while positions of lower responsibility are typically given to local people of color (Crewe and Fernando, 2006). Recipients engaged with the aid organizations are cognizant of these power relations—recognizing that decision-makers typically have a different skin color than those in low-wage positions. Because development projects are largely administered by expatriates, aid recipients often view development projects as belonging to “white people”, and as a result do not view themselves as active participants in development projects but as recipients of aid from white Westerners endowed with abundant resources and kindness (Loftsdóttir, 2009).

While there is a growing trend toward more equal opportunity, international development and donor organizations are still staffed primarily by a white workforce (Crewe and Fernando, 2006). The social construction of development institutions reinforces a “whiteness of power” (Goudge, 2003), which may result in a consciousness among black community members of subordination and racial inferiority tied to disadvantage (Shutt, 2006; White, 2002). As one example, Kothari, found that local black staff members were “visibly disappointed when they realized that their expatriate consultant was not white” (2006: 16). Related studies citing preferences for white workers, expats, or *wazungu* were reported in studies from Nicaragua (Goudge, 2003), Guinea Bissau (Pink, 1998), Niger (Loftsdóttir, 2009), and Tanzania and Mozambique (Baaz, 2005; Perold, Graham, Mavungu, Cronin, Muchemwa, and Lough, 2013).

Racial Ideation through Limited Contact with the Other

Research suggests that aid recipients may also have a tendency to idealize people with white skin based on positive, but very limited, interactions with expatriates. In her research, Moncrieffe found that children and adults in Uganda devalued people of their own race based on recollections of “what is considered to be persistent abuse from ‘people like them’ as opposed to instances of kindness from ‘people not like them’” (2009: 91). Interviewees in Moncrieffe’s study cited many positive examples of help, wealth, and benevolence based on limited exposure to Westerners, while they recalled only situations of abuse, mistreatment, poverty, and corruption based on regular interactions with other Ugandans (2009).

International volunteering is considered an alternative to the dominant form of market-based development. Unlike many other forms of technical aid, where consultants rarely interact with community members, development volunteers often focus on relational and human abilities through prolonged engagement and interaction (Devereux, 2008). As a people-centred and relationship-based development approach, international volunteering “potentially humanises what is often left as a technical or managerial process” (Lewis, 2005).

Consistent with a variety of psychosocial theories (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1982), we propose that immersive and prolonged encounters with international volunteers may help to reduce racialized assumptions and expectations, as both parties “move beyond assumptions and stereotypes and into negotiation and dialogue” (Kothari, 2006: 17). Theoretically, continued interactions between volunteers and community members can blur binary group preferences, along with the idealized qualities associated with race. These

propositions of racial difference in development volunteering will be examined using the narratives of black staff and community members in Kenya.

Methods

This study was part of a project assessing the impacts of international volunteers on development projects and programs (Lough, 2012). Three researchers spent one-month in Kenya conducting primary field research with development volunteers, program staff, and intended beneficiaries of volunteers service organizations. All volunteer-sending organizations participating in the study were members of the International Forum for Volunteering in Development, a global network of international volunteer cooperation organizations (IVCOs). The population of volunteers referenced in this study lived in the communities for a minimum of three months, and typically lived with a host family. As such, they are conceptually and practically different from volunteer tourists, which serve for a few days to four weeks, and typically live with other volunteers (Wearing & McGehee, 2013). Although some of the nine organizations participating in the study requested to remain anonymous, they include large publically-financed IVCOs based in Canada, Germany, Italy, Japan, Norway and the UK.

Research occurred at 12 different placement sites across three locations in Kenya. The research design was a retrospective case control study: measuring outcomes of sites receiving volunteers at one point in time, and asking the communities and staff members of volunteer-hosting organizations to reflect, post hoc, on the volunteers' influence. Meetings with stakeholders were a combination of structured interviews with staff members and participatory workshops with community members.

Staff-member interviews

Interviews took place in participating partner organizations with staff members who could speak to the potential influence of volunteers. Between one to four staff-member interviews were completed at each of the 12 placement sites, and each lasted an average of 45 minutes to one-hour. In total, researchers conducted a total of 24 staff-member interviews. All responding staff members were Kenyans of color. Additional demographic characteristics of the staff member interviews are provided in Table 1.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Participatory workshops

Informational workshops with community members were also conducted to help understand the anticipated and unanticipated outcomes of international volunteers from the perspective of intended beneficiaries. As such, these methods move beyond much of the existing knowledge on race and development both theoretically and methodologically. As Palacio stresses, the voice of volunteers and foreigners have heretofore composed the lion's share of the evidence in this space (2010). These workshops were conducted at seven different placement sites in the three selected cities. The format of the workshop were, in essence, lengthy focus groups following the United Nations Volunteers' Evaluation Handbook methodology (UNV, 2011). Participating community members were chosen by the hosting organization based on their frequency of interactions with international volunteers.

Due to occasional language barriers, a local female research assistant helped to complete interviews and to co-facilitate the participatory workshops with a white female researcher from the United States. Each workshop lasted approximately 3-4 hours, followed by an interactive lunch discussion. In total, researchers conducted a total of 59 community-member interviews (in workshop format). Although there were ethnic/tribal differences between some community members, all participants were Kenyans of color.

Instrumentation

The interview guides aimed to measure variations that may affect outcomes, including the race of international volunteers. As part of a semi-structured interview guide, participants were asked, “Have you noticed any differences in the contributions from different kinds of international volunteers? If the issue of race was not brought up when answering this open question, researchers followed-up with the prompt, “Have you noticed any differences in the contributions from volunteers of different ethnicities or races?” They were further prompted with the question, “Have you noticed any differences from volunteers coming from the global North and the global South?”

Thematic Coding

Two consultants from Kenya transcribed and translated all digital recordings. English was the primary language spoken during the interviews. However, because participants in the workshops occasionally spoke in Swahili, minimal translation was required. Examination of racial perceptions included straightforward thematic coding rather than formal qualitative analysis. In this case, any instance where a respondent made reference to racial difference was coded to race. All instances coded to race were then taken together to gain a more complete picture of community member perceptions.

Postcolonial critique often questions, “By what right and on whose authority does one claim to speak on behalf of others?” (McEwan, 2001, p. 96). Because two of the researchers were white and from the United States, and one researcher was a relatively privileged Kenyan, we fully acknowledge that our racial, national, and class privileges prevent us from obtaining and understanding certain knowledges. We also recognize the biases, partiality, and cultural specificity inherent in our interpretations, and are conscious that these biases may not accurately reflect the intent of informants. In an attempt to minimize impartiality, two staff members and three community members provided feedback during the preparation of this manuscript. The final manuscript was also “member checked” with informants—though only a handful responded.

Findings and Discussion

Race was consistently portrayed a socially-constructed rather than a strictly biologically-defined concept; interviewees frequently switched between using terms: whites, *mzungu* (literally translated as an ‘aimless wanderer’), Westerners, internationals, and expatriates when referring to volunteers from countries in the Global North (Crewe and Fernando, 2006). Race was viewed as spatially contingent, and largely portrayed in reference to material and social inequalities. For instance, the term *mzungu* (or plural *wazungu*) is used in reference to multinational expatriates as well as the white postcolonial community residing in Kenya (Uusihakala, 1999). This fusion of racial and geographical traits was common and consistent throughout the interviews.

One finding associated with the conflation of these categories is reflected in what seems to be a preference for white international volunteers from the Global North: “We have a community that is prejudiced... Where you’d go to certain places with *mzungu* then people want to listen to you...As opposed to if you had uh...a black.” The following findings sketch potential reasons for this differences in greater detail, and describe how these differences may be perpetuated via engagement with international volunteers. From the perspective of staff and community members in Kenya, there is an evident association between: (i) race and resources or assistance, (ii) race and knowledge /expertise/ skills, and (iii) race and trustworthiness.

Resources

The most evident and frequently stated reasons for preferring white volunteers was a belief that *wazungu* are better able to contribute resources to support the livelihoods of community members. Many respondents carried expectations of help from white volunteers based on their perceptions that white people are wealthy and well-connected, as the following two quotes illustrate:

(i) The general perception of the people? All wazungu have money. (ii) Sometimes we do expect a lot from foreigners...when I see a mzungu there is this culture of expecting good from them. I think for the community, they will prefer white volunteers.

Staff members reported that this perception often hinders their ability to work effectively in communities. Of some concern, the racial stereotypes and assumptions that emerge through the unilateral structures of North to South models of aid produce scripts that may bind both aid workers and potential recipients of aid (Loftsdóttir, 2009). When local staff members work alongside white volunteers, community members often arrive at the incorrect conclusions that these staff have access to resources and can provide assistance to their families. With these scripts in place, recipients often assume that international volunteers have ample wealth and influence to create social, economic and political change. In contrast, volunteers, as well as the local staff members they work with, often expressed frustration that they were not able to adequately meet the high expectations placed on them by recipients of aid.

Such stereotyped expectations demand that expatriates “have to carry the burden of being white just as [locals] have an equal burden of being black” (Crewe and Fernando, 2006: 52). While the burden may certainly not be as equal as Crewe and Fernando suggest, expectations of aid often place unfair demands on international volunteers based solely on the color of their skin. Expectations for help and assistance also seem to seep out to black staff members, who claim that “it is very difficult” to meet expectations from community members who expect to receive help from them based on their mere association with *wazungu*.

Community members also seemed to associate white race with the external connections or “bridging social capital” that international volunteers may provide (see Narayan, 1999; Woolcock, 1998). A few staff members stated that when they host white volunteers, this alters others’ perceptions of the organization as more globally connected. Therefore, volunteers are often perceived as being able to secure resources needed to sustain the organizations, as having more innovative ideas, and as having greater access to external support and technology—as illustrated in the following quote:

Whenever we see the whites come and work alongside us, [the community] really values our organization. They don’t just see us as the local NGO, but they see some sort of international face—that we are, well, kind of networked....

While this perception may have practical merit, it fails to challenge the structure of development institutions, and create significant challenges for people of color that work in partner organizations. One common belief articulated by both staff and community members was that external funding organizations may have more respect for white volunteers, and may respond to their requests and ideas more quickly. This is consistent with other literature on race in development. As Kothari found in her study, white directors have greater social capital with the expatriate community and are better able to “build up contacts with the white power holders” (Kothari, 2006: 16). Indeed, in one case funding sources started to dry up after an NGO appointed a qualified and highly educated black director.

As with other scholarship concerned with aid dependency, access to these additional resources also raises concerns about “the sustainability of a system where expatriate presence is

constantly needed to assure funding” (Chung, 2012: 6). The issue of race may further exacerbate expectations and deepen dependency mindsets. As one anthropologist noted from her previous experience volunteering in Africa, despite living for many months in a community, “many [locals] never seemed to stop hoping that I would be able to improve their lives in some ways, bringing them ‘projects’ in the form of cattle, corn or the construction of wells, thus never forgetting that I was white” (Loftsdóttir 2002: 313).

Knowledge and skills

Another commonly held preference for white volunteers related to knowledge, expertise, and skills. While some staff members endorsed the comparable competency of Kenyans and black volunteers from other African countries, they also reported how difficult it was for black volunteers to receive the same degree of respect from community members. As one informant stated, “When we get people like the whites coming to a country like ours, we think they are much better than us...” Another staff member remarked that local volunteers are not taken as seriously as white volunteers:

The community believes those who are coming from outside, who are white...are coming with new ideas and different things...you can bring the local volunteers to tell them the same thing; but if you bring people from outside [the community will] take it differently and they'll think it's more serious.

The perception that white volunteers have superior knowledge and expertise also seemed to impact the community's readiness to accept and follow through on suggestions made by volunteers based on race. As one staff member stated, “If my skin was white...ninety percent of the time, they [community members] will do it first...same information, and they will do it first, and then will ask...“is [this] working”? This statement is a clear reflection of the claim that race represent differences in knowledge and relationships of power at the micro level that are based on past claims and expectations about who and what is right—knowledge that often remains unchallenged until the “solution” fails to produce desired results. One informant offered a detailed explanation as to why the community as well as some staff members tended to perceive white volunteers as better informed.

There is a tendency, even with the staff here, that we tend to look at volunteers who come from the Western world and... elevate them at higher level—regardless of whether a volunteer who has come from Zambia or Malawi is highly skilled... We would value what this [white] person is doing more than we value what this other [African] person would do, simply because of their race. This is the way we have been cultured and we've [been] brought up. White people usually know more than black people would know.

As this informant suggests, regardless of volunteers' inherent levels of skills and ability, there appears to be an internalized and inter-generationally-embedded view within the black Kenyan culture that white opinion and actions are elevated. Colonial rule was often based on violence and despotism, and reproduced bureaucratic institutions of political domination in many countries in Africa (Berman, 1998; wa Muiu, 2010). However, the more insidious and possibly one of the most debilitating outcomes associated with colonization may have emanated from within the black ethnic communities. The belief that being black inevitably makes one less than the white other appears to have been transmitted inter-generationally, albeit unintentionally. Continuing across generations, racial/cultural expectations may become deeply rooted as internalized power references and self-identification vis-à-vis others is embedded in culture (Bourdieu 1980). As Moncrieffe warns, “all sorts of inequalities can...become chronic where people hold unfavorable and patently disempowering perceptions of themselves” (2009: 88).

Trustworthiness

It is important to note that staff members rarely asserted that they themselves believed white volunteers were more trustworthy—however, they did consistently assert that the race of volunteers affected other people’s trust of the organization, as well as a more generalized trust in volunteers’ actions and motivations. As one staff member stated, “People from Western countries don’t have that culture of using people.” Another community affirmed a belief that, “A *mzungu* can’t lie. Even if he does something wrong, he will just tell you the truth.” Another community member explained that *wazungu* are innately honest and worthy of trust:

I think...we also have what I call the ‘mzungu factor’... when [community members] see a mzungu they believe... now we won’t have theft, because...where the mzungu comes from, they don’t tolerate this kind of corruption...when they see a mzungu, they see things are changing. Things will brighten up. So it is also like a morale booster to the community.

A belief in the inherent honesty and trust of *wazungu* appears to persist among segments of the population despite the history of colonization in Africa that included bureaucratic authoritarianism and manipulation of the indigenous populations for the purpose of political and economic control (Berman, 1998). This finding is also not unique to Kenya—and not unique to international volunteering. A study in Indonesia found that funders prefer the involvement of white expatriates in projects due to perceptions among locals that expatriates are less corrupt and use resources more efficiently (Chung, 2012).

Although it is somewhat counterintuitive that the descendants of colonized persons have a discernible preference and heightened trust for descendants of colonizers that participate in the affairs of the indigenous people at the grassroots level, “patron-client relations” is often characteristic of African politics and is grounded in the colonial history, culture and political economy of contemporary Kenya (Berman, 1998: 308). Consequently, the impact of a “colonization of the mind” on racial expectations seems to persist despite decades of postcolonial independence (Ngũgĩ 1986).

Perceived advantages of black international volunteers

Only three staff members (all from the same organization) and a handful of community members indicated a preference for volunteers from other countries in Africa compared to volunteers from outside of Africa. As one informant stated, “If [the] volunteers [are] from Africa...it is so easy for them to fit in...and understand each other”. Another respondent explained, “working with a black man who is an international volunteer, the community thinks he is their own, who went outside and is back... it is like a brother”. A number of respondents also believed that volunteers from Africa are more accustomed to manual labor, and tend to work harder when manual labor is required. They also suggested that it is easier to talk frankly and openly about development plans with the volunteers from other countries in Africa. While they may also discuss plans with volunteers from the Global North, there is a perception that neither party tends to be as open in these discussions. There was also a reported precedence that volunteers from outside of Africa had been less likely to implement plans developed in collaboration with community members, and vice-versa.

Practice Implications

These findings raise critical questions about the moral dimensions of the North to South model of international volunteer service (Schwenke, 2009). When packaged as a form of international assistance (see Sherraden, Lough, and McBride, 2008), the findings extend previous scholarship by asking, “how does structuring of [international volunteering as] aid

relations stimulate a certain racial cartography?” (Loftsdóttir, 2009: 7). Entertaining this question, Crewe and Fernando assert that discussions of racial issues in international development remain taboo because “the necessary solution would have to be structural and revolutionary” (2006: 52). Assuming that the structure of aid is unlikely to change radically in the near future, practitioners can adopt incremental strategies to dampen negative causes and consequences.

Strengths-based Dialogue and Critical Consciousness

Conceptions of the other that arise from unequal give-take relationships can certainly be negotiated, but not without a reframing the reciprocal benefit arising from international volunteering. Consistent with the key recommendation emerging from Perold et al.’s research on international volunteer service in Mozambique and Tanzania (2011), much can be done to raise critical consciousness of host communities and organizations. To shift the power balance, critical conscious raising or *conscientization* may have a significant impact on disempowered racial perceptions (Freire 1973). Because identities are typically negotiated and understood through discourse and interaction, intentional and open dialogue between volunteers and community members may be one method of raising critical consciousness. For instance, honest discussions about the history and colonization of the Kenyan nation, and sharing stories of poverty, deprivation and inequality in their country vis-à-vis dominant structural powers may help communities identify external influences on the now intergenerational perceptions of racial inferiority (Loftsdóttir, 2002; Moncrieffe, 2009).

By confronting their position to whiteness, Kenyans may reflect on disparity and engage in polemic discourse to actively challenge racial denigration (Fox, 2012). As one fruitful example of consciousness raising, the Black Power movement in Jamaica has been successful at highlighting strengths of black communities by presenting counter-ideologies to the dominant postcolonial discourse (Moncrieffe, 2009). Through open dialogues among and between members of the community, organization staff, and international volunteers, the re-interpretation of the historical, socio-cultural, political, and economic dynamics of colonialism in Kenya becomes possible. Discussing the more accurate account of what was a massive, highly structured, and often deliberately planned and executed dismantling of a long-standing functional society has the potential to bring into conscious relief an alternative ideology pertaining to questions of racial superiority/inferiority for all involved stakeholders. Likewise, the impact of a heightened awareness of the depth and breadth of socio-cultural and geo-political machinations needed to subjugate precolonial Kenyan society for a period of more than 60 years has the potential to shift the perception of innate inferiority to one of strength, stamina, and endurance.

Strengths-based dialogue may also help communities to better identify and capitalize on the beneficial aspects of their own culture and race. Discourse could highlight the strengths and assets of local communities in comparison with white volunteers or other development workers—with the goal of strengthening black identity. Regard for indigenous knowledge could confront the “epistemic violence” that has invalidated and trivialized alternative ways of knowing and doing by Western experts during colonial times and beyond (McEwan, 2001; Spivak, 1988). Heightened critical consciousness in local communities with a focus on indigenous strengths may also help to avoid the potential dangers of implementing Northern templates for development in Southern contexts (Evans, 2004). Although findings suggest that community members may defer to volunteers’ ideas as new or “better”, uncritical adoption of proposed solutions and “best practices” from the North are often ineffective when implemented in a different culture and context (Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock, 2012).

Decentralized Decision-making

One way to highlight strengths inherent in Kenyan communities and to validate indigenous practices may be to decentralize decision-making – giving more substantive decision making power to partners in the South. Principles of ownership and mutual accountability have become longstanding standards for aid effectiveness (OECD, 2008), though they are regularly only given lip-service. More often, development workers and international volunteers ask for consultation and participation when deciding on development interventions. However, the ultimate decision to fund projects nearly always resides with the (usually white) development practitioner (Crewe and Fernando, 2006). Although international volunteers purportedly foster more democratic and participatory modes of engagement, findings suggest that community members are, nonetheless, well-aware of the locus of decision-making power and the privileges associated with positions of whiteness. The association with international volunteering and funding may play a role in maintaining power dynamics. As Chung discovered in her research in Indonesia, the “the appointment of local staff does not necessarily translate into local ownership, particularly if expatriate presence and white agency remain central to secure funding” (Chung, 2012: 8). Although it may not solve the immediate association between whiteness and resources, transferring positions of decision-making power to local staff or volunteers from the Global North to southern development partners may help validate strengths and increase trust of black leaders.

The Mutuality of Volunteer Service

Highlighting the mutuality of exchange and the duality of benefits may also help to empower community members by altering the unilateral helper/beneficiary mentality. Although volunteers working in the global South commonly assert that they receive more from their service than they provide (Law, 1994; Rehnstrom, 2000), findings suggest that this message may not be transmitted to providers in the host country. By emphasizing the significant benefits that volunteers receive as they live and work in host communities, community members may more accurately view the relationships as a partnership or exchange rather than as unilateral aid. As the following quote from previous research illustrates, a heightened sense of empowerment may develop as community members realize how volunteers are benefiting from the exchange: “These white people come and do research; this means there is something we know that they don’t” (Moncrieffe, 2009: 91). Although volunteers often recognize personal gains, racialized perceptions of inferiority and dependency will be perpetuated if the reciprocal nature of exchange relationships remains unrecognized or unspoken.

Emphasizing the mutuality of exchange is also needed on the “sending side” of the volunteering partnership. Not all volunteers stop to recognize the strengths inherent in communities and the benefits they are likely to receive as they volunteer in the Global South. Volunteers often embark on their journey with high expectations to “change the world”, which is further reinforced through marketing by sending agencies (Simpson, 2004). For instance, images from the west often paint sub-Saharan Africa as disordered and rife with social problems, militarism and corruption (Caton & Almeida, 2009; Kothari, 2006a). This perception is further enhanced as development agencies exploit isolated images of poverty and desperation to solicit contributions, donations and volunteers (Rigby, 1996). Even the language of volunteer service connotes unidirectional benefit with colonial overtones (Palacios, 2010). Volunteer sending agencies may alter expectations by more accurately portraying the strengths of partner communities in the Global South, and more realistically communicating the contributions of, and benefits to, volunteers.

In addition, volunteers are often unaware of how their color affects dynamics of privilege and power. Raising self-awareness among volunteers is critical if racialized aid relationships are to be challenged. As White aptly suggests for those working in the global South, challenging the “color-blind stance of development...depends on being [able] to see one’s own color, thus naturalizing the privilege to which it gives rise” (White, 2002: 418). Volunteer programs can build structured times for reflection to explicitly examine historic colonial relationships. Ethnocentric discourses on development rooted in European cultures and values must be challenged if complex racial relationships tied to global inequalities are to be understood. When discussions about racial dynamics are an explicit component of volunteer orientation and ongoing reflective practice, self-awareness can be greatly enhanced. As Kothari argues, “we need to identify and challenge how the silence around race allows western practitioners of development to avoid being accountable for the powers, privileges and inequalities that continue to flow from whiteness” (Kothari, 2006: 20). Greater awareness of racial difference as a symbolic expression of postcolonial disparities can challenge volunteers to reflect on their own unconscious or unobserved “helping” biases, and to consider how they might avoid perpetuating inequities through their work.

Culturally Immersive Relationships

Loftsdóttir’s assumption that extended time on the ground and deeper cultural immersion would diminish expectations was somewhat supported in findings from this study; the importance of a volunteers’ race seems to have a greater influence when volunteers stay for less than a few months. According to focus groups, volunteers staying for a long-term in the community are less likely to provide resources directly, while those who come for a shorter-term frequently tend to give resources or tap into connections with resources abroad. If volunteers stay in a community for long periods without providing resources, community members discover that, despite the fact that they are white Westerners, they are often unwilling or unable to provide resources. Similar conclusions could be extended to conclusions made in the short-term about connections between whiteness and knowledge, trust, and benevolence.

Indeed, this may be one advantage of utilizing international volunteers over full-time development consultants. As Kothari notes, the “social lives [of consultants] tend to be confined to the white expatriate community, further reifying divisions between ‘locals’ and expats’ (2006: 17). In contrast, the policy of many volunteer organizations is for volunteers to live with a local family in the [typically rural] community where they are working (Sherraden, Stringham, Costanzo, and McBride, 2006). In principle, development volunteers may only see other expatriates during rare occasions when they travel to the city for trainings or convenings (Crewe and Fernando, 2006). Considering the race-based perceptions that emerged from this study, dynamics may be even more pronounced in development projects that employ short-term or disengaged development consultants, as well as short-term volunteer tourists.

Summary

This study aimed to confront the issue of race as a typical blind spot in international development practice. By recording and representing the voices of community members in Kenya, practitioners can better comprehend the benefits and complications that arise as white volunteers from the Global North serve in low-income communities in the Global South. These methods provide us with valuable insights into the lived experiences of intended aid recipients—moving marginally beyond current discourse on race in development studies. Because white volunteers are often commended with high levels of resources, knowledge, skills, trust, and compassion, their racial privilege tends to result in a comparative denigration of indigenous ideas and

practices. Rather than sacrificing this valuable, though occasionally burdensome, “white elephant” presented to partner organizations in the Global South, we recommend potential strategies to raise the critical consciousness of host communities, volunteers, and partner organizations. Although neocolonial power structures are difficult to shift at the macro level, strengths-based dialogue, decentralized decision making, enhancing the mutuality of international exchange, and promoting culturally immersive relationships are micro steps toward greater racial equality in development practice.

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Table 1: Demographic statistics of respondents

	Staff members ($n = 24$)		Community members ($n = 59$)	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
City				
Nairobi	16	66%	34	58%
Lari	4	17%	12	20%
Kisumu	4	17%	13	22%
Location				
Urban	14	58%	24	41%
Rural	6	25%	12	20%
Sub-urban	4	17%	23	39%
Volunteer placement duration				
Short-term	13	54%	36	61%
Long-term	11	46%	23	39%
Gender				
Male	13	54%	31	52%
Female	11	46%	28	48%