OPINION EDITORIAL

Striving Towards Symbiosis: Addressing Sustainability of Global Health Placements

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INTRODUCTION

In an ever-globalizing world, there is an increasing need for global health (GH) research and development efforts that aim to address social and health inequities locally and globally [1]. Students engaging in GH placements can offer great prospects to the field; however, the lack of sustainability of such placements is frequently debated [2,3].

For my undergraduate thesis, my research partner and I developed a six-week theatre program for Indigenous youth in Hamilton, Ontario. The objective was to foster a supportive space for youth to explore their powerful, yet often silenced, voices using creative theatre games. With every session, the reciprocity of trust grew as the youth confided in me and I in them. They shared their stories of resilience, intergenerational trauma, how various social systems – such as schools, families, and shelters – continue to fail them, and how this very community centre we visited had become their safe haven.

By the end of the six weeks, the openness and engagement of the youth, alongside their sentimental farewell ceremony, reflected the success of the program. In fact, the youth requested for us to visit soon. Unfortunately, as commonly seen in student placements, this never happened – for one reason or another, I never returned to the centre. This observation led me to question: how can we address the lack of sustainability in short-term GH placements (GHPs)?

In this opinion piece, I will briefly delve into the current state of sustainability in GHPs and consider how to enhance the symbiotic partnerships they set out to achieve.

THE ISSUE AT HAND

It is well-documented that GHPs enhance the outcomes that organizations could achieve on their own [2,3]. Some benefits include: generating awareness and funding, driving smarter policy development, and expanding stakeholder engagement [2-4]. Sustainability of GHPs, on the other hand, has been heavily contended in the literature [3-6]. Although various guidelines for sustainability have been developed, contextual factors can hinder their effectiveness and/or implementation [7]. Continuous advancement of neo-colonial agendas, alongside deeply embedded institutional and economic hierarchies, may prevent the truly sustainable partnerships proposed by such guidelines while further disempowering already marginalized communities [7].

For example, a protocol incorporated by many GH programs is the "pre-departure" form, where students outline their objectives, resources to be used, plan for demonstrating their learning, and projected target dates to complete the above-mentioned tasks [8]. While these outlines help students visualize their goals, they may "perpetuate an overly simplified view of global development" [9]. These objectives are often determined with little to no consultation from host communities, leading to activities that do not meet locally identified needs [3,10]. In fact, the mere nature of pre-departure forms can be controversial if they are not fluid nor

adaptable to the host community throughout the duration of the placement. Students may risk developing "culturally incongruent programming" and creating "parallel systems that disrupt established local services and redirect scarce local resources, which fosters dependency instead of building capacity" [10].

CONSIDERATIONS

In order to develop symbiotic partnerships and align objectives, students should accustom themselves to their host community to better understand their culture, environment, and physical and socio-political infrastructure. As a result, students would be better able to address the host population's needs, which would then inform and shape their learning objectives. As suggested by Ouma and Dimaras [9], "a disorderly or 'chaotic' approach to acquiring impactful change, coupled with a focus on building solid human relationships, rather than following a set of rigid goals or tasks" is fundamental when striving to develop and maintain truly sustainable partnerships [9]. The authors highlight that flexibility is necessary to "avoid being locked into goals that may be artificial" so that students and local hosts can "create something of value that is mutually beneficial" [9].

In order to integrate fluidity, I propose that we turn rigid checklists into open-ended questions that would be discussed amongst collaborating parties, as well as explored individually by participants through reflections before, during, and after the termination of the placement. These questions could include:

1. Who are you and with whom are you working?
2. What are your/ their skills and objectives?
3. What are the barriers to meeting the proposed outcomes? What could be done to mitigate and overcome these barriers?
4. How can you engage with the host community to optimize your presence and mitigate the potential harm of your absence once you complete the placement?
5. What measures can be taken to facilitate and integrate continuous feedback between you and the community?

The last question listed is perhaps the most fundamental to my proposal. Engstrom and Jones [11] highlight how an iterative feedback process is necessary in order to address unexpected events and developments that are inevitable in any work environment [11]. In other words, in order to successfully adapt and shift the trajectory of practicums to align with the changing needs and skills of both both parties, ongoing communication about shared objectives is imperative [12].

CONCLUSION

In the case of my thesis, my partner and I funnelled considerable time and resources into developing an innovative, yet temporary, program. Had we taken the time to learn more about the community's objectives and needs, we could have worked to bolster its existing drama programs, which would continue to run even after our departure. As critiqued in the literature and exemplified through my experience, the limited time spent by volunteers in host communities can generate unsustainable outcomes and potentially strain overstressed organizations [9,13]. Although countless sustainability protocols for GHPs have been developed to mitigate this issue, certain limitations may compromise their effectiveness. The crux of this paper however, is not to suggest we forego existing protocols or GH work as a whole. In fact, this work is essential in narrowing the gap of health inequities locally and globally. Rather, I hope to challenge and prompt further dialogue on *how* we employ such frameworks. By incorporating reflexivity and flexibility into our practice, we can begin to unravel and thus address the deeper challenges to forming truly symbiotic GH partnerships.

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