

## REFLECTIVE NARRATIVE

# How to Ethically Participate in International Development Work

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We make decisions and take actions daily, but sometimes we find ourselves in situations where it is difficult to judge which path is morally correct. This is defined as being faced with an ethical dilemma. As a global health professional, I attend talks to learn about global engagement and what it entails prior to embarking on my own journeys abroad. For example, I participated in a workshop on “Critical and Ethical Global Engagement,” by Bob Gough, Director of International Internships and Development at Western University. Following the workshop, I reflected on the examples of ethical dilemmas discussed – why they arise, how they can be prevented through self-reflexivity, and the role ethics play in global engagement.

At this same workshop, Bob Gough told the story of a guest speaker from the global South who was invited to attend a conference in Canada but could not attain a Visa, consequently missing the event. This situation was an example of mobility inequality, as not all people from the global South have the privilege to obtain a Visa to travel for professional purposes. This raises the question of why this divide exists between the global North and South in terms of opportunities.

In another example, after the completion of a project, members of the local community where it was taking place requested that volunteers from the global North provide them with more computers. The volunteers were hurt and disheartened by this request, as they had already provided a lot and felt their previous efforts were not valued. The volunteers demonstrated a shallow understanding of why these people asked for more despite all that

they had done so far.

If the volunteers had put themselves in the shoes of the members of the local community, they would have realized that these people consider them as “angels” that can provide limitless assistance. This reflects the fact that we as the global North have established ourselves as saviours of the global South with infinite wealth and resources to offer. Therefore, people living in the global South are not at fault when making such a demand, given these stereotypes that already exist. This is called the ‘saviour complex’, in which the people being served are not actually being empowered but are rather becoming dependent on international aid. This phenomenon highlights another type of ethical dilemma.

If we ever feel that the local community is using us as the global North, the argument can be made that the global North partner is exploiting the global South in that relationship. There are several instances where this is more apparent, whereas in others it is hidden but still exists. A common example is unethical marketing and advertising to promote international experiential learning programs. For example, local communities are often portrayed in horrific ways through photographs to get more donations, such as showing flies around a malnourished kid; a White volunteer holding a Black infant supposedly representing them as an orphan; and a volunteer offering food to a child in Africa. All of these scenarios reinforce stereotypes and the crux of the politics of misrepresentation, especially when those viewing the pictures are unaware of the context. The community that is portrayed may feel

embarrassed, yet foreigners continue to engage in such behaviours, highlighting their own ignorance.

There is a blog by Pippa Biddle entitled, “The Problem with Little White Girls (and Boys): Why I Stopped Being a Voluntourist,” which describes a university student studying in the USA who was photographed while he was a child [1]. The photo was still being used by an international aid organization for donations several years after the picture was taken. The student filed a case stating it was disrespectful and embarrassing for himself and his family. Although this student was able to fight for his right, there are several others who are not privileged enough. Once again, this emphasizes the power and privilege of living in the global North.

I also began to ponder upon how easily we assume certain things are acceptable in the global South even though we would not tolerate the same behaviour in the global North. For example, providing volunteers from the global North access to patients’ histories/charts in a developing country is a serious breach of privacy, and volunteers are often not even trained medical professionals. In the North this would not be permitted, so it is interesting how we do not question why it is acceptable in the South or prevent such behaviour. In another instance, kids from a community in the global South asked volunteers to take their photos and the volunteers willingly took it without thinking twice about the implications. If a similar situation were to happen in Canada, where a stranger would walk onto a school property and take pictures of students, it would be considered a serious offense and it wouldn’t take long for the police to arrive. I am sure there are many comparable circumstances which further demonstrate why self-reflexivity is crucial, especially when working abroad.

While reflection occurs after the experience and is regarded as thinking about the learning outcomes, self-reflexivity occurs in the moment and involves being cognisant of one’s actions and thinking about how those actions might be interpreted by others. It includes asking oneself the question, “Am I behaving in a manner consistent with the norms or am I being discourteous, offensive or stereotypical?”

Self-reflexivity also involves reflecting about what one is thinking or feeling; paying attention to one’s reactions and beliefs, acknowledging one’s emotions and thoughts, and deciding whether they are justified given the situation. Furthermore, while reflection is interpreting only one’s own experiences, self-reflexivity is comparing personal experiences with others’ experiences and relationships. It is thinking about others’ perspective and understanding their viewpoints. Hence, self-reflexivity is broad and, although it entails reflection, it is much more than that. As Bob Gough perfectly summarizes, “when you think you will do more harm than good when you go on a trip, you will be more self-reflexive.” This is true because the more self-conscious we are about our attire, communication style, and behaviour, the more we will reflect about whether our actions are appropriate and ethical for the situation.

A specific strategy for critical and ethical global engagement that I gathered from the workshop was not enforcing personal values and beliefs on the community and others we interact with during our time abroad. There is a fine line between sharing information and imposing thoughts. So, to avoid an ethical dilemma, we should engage in conversations where everyone can contribute their ideas, ensuring the project is owned by the local community and not imposed by us - collaboration is the key! This will aid in empowering the community and fostering relationships based on trust. Additionally, we should be aware of shifting goals. We may have an interpretation of what our role entails for the project, goals we want to achieve and skills we want to develop. However, when we get on the ground, the community may require our skills to be applied to something else that we did not expect. In this case, we need to remain open-minded and look forward to the experience because, in the end, we will achieve something valuable from it. We should not refuse nor influence the members of a local community to accept our preconceived plans as this will only reproduce colonial relationships. Instead, we should approach global health experiences as learners and not the experts.

## REFERENCES

1. Biddle, P. The Problem with Little White Girls (and Boys): Why I Stopped Being a Voluntourist [Internet]. Pippa Biddle. 2014 [cited 2021Apr26]. Available from: <https://pippabiddle.com/2014/02/18/the-problem-with-little-white-girls-and-boys/>