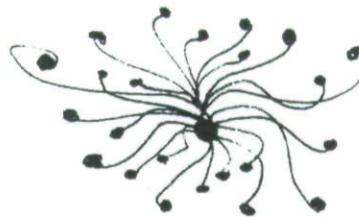


INTERNATIONAL SERVICE WORK: WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THE SERVICE IS OVER?

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International service work provides social work students with hands-on experience to learn about the global issues of poverty, social justice, and social services in the context of participation in community-service projects. The benefits of such experiences to the students' academic, personal, and professional development are the focus of the integration and reflection process for most students. As a group leader of international service programs, the author reflects on the challenges of facilitating learning experiences that transcend the personal gains and encourage long-term community building.

I looked across the table at my young friend, Charles, who has served as the unofficial guide for the student groups I bring to Ghana each year during the semester break. We're sitting at the table of a favorite local hangout, freshly showered after a day of service work, bottles of assorted beverages covering the table before us. "Please have dinner with us, Charles," several students plead. Charles and I exchange glances and he smiles shyly. I have known Charles for several years, and have come to rely on him as my unofficial travel assistant to help my groups with important needs such as identifying the best street food vendors for local cuisine, navigating the market place of aggressive vendors, and getting the best currency exchange rates. I have come to know that Charles lives a life of daily survival. I know that whether or not he eats each day depends on what kind of day he had at the market. At our dinner table I sense that he is fascinated and impressed with the comfort and easy chatter that accompanies the process of ordering drinks and contemplating menu choices. I know that he has anticipated our visit for months, excited to make new friends with these Americans who travel with ease with passports that allow them access and freedom to experience and explore other worlds. To alleviate an awkward moment for Charles, I say that we would like to buy him dinner to thank him for spending the day helping students shop at the market, exchange money, and negotiate cab fares.



The meal is a delightful experience of sampling spicy jollof rice, kellee-wellee plantains, foo-foo, and other delicious foods mixed with laughter and loud music from the street. When we're finished eating, the plates are taken away; many still containing food that will be thrown away because someone was too full to finish or because someone just wanted to sample a dish while planning to order something else. Such wastefulness is unknown in a country where children die in the streets every day from malnutrition and starvation, and I worry that our behavior makes us seem ignorant and insensitive. Under other circumstances I am sure that Charles would have gathered the discarded food and taken it home to his mother and younger brother, but for now he is acting polite and grateful around his new foreign friends. They don't know that Charles' family is often hungry, that his six-year-old "adopted" brother is alive because he was discovered by Charles' mother when she heard his infant cries at the bottom of a cliff on a beach area known as a common dumping ground for unwanted babies. We pay our checks and discuss plans for after dinner — figuring out who is going to the Internet Café, who needs to change money, who wants to go out to hear music. By the end of the meal the

disparity between the African and the American students' worlds seems painfully obvious, but I fear it is lost on most of the students.

Our group of American students has come to Ghana to participate in a service project that represents an ongoing partnership between the School of Social Work and Sovereign Global Mission (SGM), an NGO for street children in Accra. Prior to the trip, the group met several times to prepare for this experience by studying the culture, participating in team building exercises, and learning about cultural sensitivity. In reality, nothing can quite prepare the students for immersion into community work with the world's poorest and most vulnerable children who are struggling to survive in unimaginable poverty. Each day we are exposed to conditions of severe human suffering and endless need. Students participate in outreach work in the slum community of C.M.B., named for Cocoa Marketing Board, a former trade area in the center of the capital that has become a community to hundreds of homeless children who have migrated there from their rural villages. C.M.B. is home to children who work as shoe-shine boys, porters, water sellers, and beggars among other efforts to survive. Some children are second generation street children, born to mothers who gave birth as street children themselves. The prevalence of street children in Ghana is a relatively new social issue. In 2003 C.A.S. notes that "street children were a new phenomenon in Ghanaian society [in 1993]" (p. 7). Among many reasons for the large increase in street children is a shift in Ghanaian culture and social structure. Pride in extended family has been "one of the cornerstones of African culture and traditions, and it has served as Africa's social net for the young, elderly, disabled, and disadvantaged" (C.A.S., 2003, p.20).

However, in recent years this vital element of culture has been lost due to urbanization, individualism, socio-economic distress, and influences from the Western World. This devaluing of the extended family has resulted in an increase of children with no caretakers who are at risk for illness, exploitation by adults, human trafficking, prostitution and lives of

poverty. Although many feel the state should provide a security net for these children, there are not adequate resources to meet this demand (CAS, 2003). Social services as we know them in the U.S. do not exist for street children in Ghana. In traditional African culture, "social services" usually means one's extended family; and when you no longer have parents, you must struggle to survive any way that you can.

During our stay in Ghana we will assist our N.G.O. partner with several projects that represent the goals of this organization. Some of the programs receive grant funding, such as the micro-credit lending program that helps small groups of street mothers start up bread-baking businesses in an effort to empower these women to become financially self-sufficient. An apprenticeship program receives a small grant from the Ghana Aids Commission to educate and train young street girls in entrepreneurial skill development by placing them in apprenticeships throughout the greater Accra region. Another program aimed at HIV/AIDS prevention trains at-risk youth to be peer educators within their communities to provide information and health education to other youth. A major long-term project is the building of a Child Development Center in the rural village of Adoteiman that will someday serve as a school and shelter for orphaned children. This project is funded solely through donations, and has become a shared dream of S.G.M. and every student volunteer group that has worked to clear ground, mix concrete, make bricks, and contribute all kinds of sweat labor toward this construction.

Among all of S.G.M.'s programs, their field outreach work in CMB is the most raw, unsettling service work our students do. It involves making contacts with homeless children and adults to provide basic first aid and counseling, and to identify the most dire situations that need some kind of immediate attention. As we accompany the field director on her rounds, our presence provides some children with their first exposure to *obrunis* (white foreigners) and for some it may be a frightening experience. Some children cry and run and hide when they see us, the color of our skin representing something foreign,

unknown, and perhaps dangerous. After a while the children warm up to us and follow us around, the numbers growing as the word gets out that we will take their picture or give them a band aid or a piggy-back ride. The first time this group set foot in C.M.B., we encountered a young woman with a severely burned leg as a result of a coal fire that had fallen on her. The burn covered most of her thigh and showed signs of early gangrene. The woman and others in the community had been trying to raise the 180,000 cedis (equivalent to \$20.00 U.S.) to cover the cost of a visit to the health clinic, but they were unable to raise this amount of money. Our group collected \$50.00 to cover the cost of the visit and follow-up care. The young woman and her husband cried with gratitude for our help. This was a particularly difficult day for our group, as the students tried to contemplate the reality that this \$20.00 contribution most likely saved a woman's leg, and perhaps her life. Later that evening we spent some time discussing this incident and students expressed a variety of feeling responses including guilt, shame, sadness, and anger. How is it possible that we could save someone's life with the amount of money we might spend on a dinner or a new CD in the States? Throughout the rest of the week the reality of life in C.M.B. begins to wrap around us as we interact with children with severe illnesses, some of whom will die for what I consider stupid reasons like untreated diarrhea, cuts that have become infected, and malaria. No one can escape the thought that we each packed enough malaria pills for personal use that could be used to save a few lives in this community. In fact, the contents of most of our backpacks contain more first aid medicines and supplies than anyone in the community possesses.

We are working in a country that is stable and peaceful but, like most African nations, faces serious economic and social challenges. The Gross National Income for the average Ghanaian is the equivalent of \$350 per year; less than a dollar a day (Oppong & Oppong, 2003). Six million people in Ghana live in extreme poverty, unable to obtain basic food and other needs. This number equals one-third of the entire population. (Tengey & Oguuah,

2001). Poverty in Ghana directly contributes to the growing problem of street children in the capital of Accra. We have met hundreds of children, desperate to survive, who have migrated from rural villages to the city in search of opportunities for work, an education, and money to send back home. The city has become a breeding ground for homelessness, disease, human trafficking, prostitution, and the endless cycle of poverty. We work with a small N.G.O. that seeks to help the growing number of street children emerge from this cycle of poverty, but the number of children in need is staggering. This is the world we enter when we engage in service work with street children in Ghana.

At various times during these years of leading student service trips to Ghana, questions and thoughts have entered my mind about the motivation and purpose of conducting these learning opportunities for students. The long-range benefits to students who immerse themselves in study, service, and learning in foreign countries are well documented. Many students return from these trips and reflect on how they were impacted by the experience – they often use terms like “life changing” and “transformative.” They talk mostly about what they saw and how it affected them, about how much they learned about themselves, and about how much they came to appreciate what they have. These reactions are usually very emotional and self-focused. I have witnessed these changes and heard the testimonies many times. As I've observed the ways in which students' learning has been enriched by service work, I have wondered how to facilitate the kind of learning that will transcend the personal and strengthen the partnership of community building. I have asked myself questions that have become my guide for encouraging the kind of learning that integrates the internal with the global and ultimately leads to a commitment to action. These questions include: What happens in the community after yet another group of wealthy American students finishes a service project undertaken as a means of learning about social problems in a developing country? Can the students appreciate the fact that the amount of money spent on the group's airfares and travel could have paid for the

completion of the Child Development Center, and how does this fact justify the trip? Does the experience raise their awareness of the inherent privilege afforded by their nationality that enables them to travel freely, to receive priority medical attention at a clinic where locals have walked up to eight hours to receive services, to buy meals among people who don't know when they will eat again?

In the process of addressing these questions, I have come to appreciate the power of each group experience to meet the highest purpose of the service experience with ripple effects that continue this support in the most unexpected ways. In the four years since our first group came to Ghana and cleared the ground for the orphanage and child development center, the relationship between the School of Social Work and S.G.M. has grown as a partnership of mutual learning and service. For students who have engaged in the service projects, the work has had an undeniable impact on their development as social workers and as global citizens. Most students have come to see the world and their place in it in a profoundly different way – one that calls for personal commitment to address issues of global poverty and injustice.

But it has been the relationships between students, volunteers, N.G.O. staff, children, and villagers that have had the most profound effect on continuing the work of our partnership in Ghana. As each group has returned, its members have been compelled to tell the story and to work actively for the programs in Ghana. Students have come to understand the lives and problems of the people they meet and engage in their struggles—not as rescuers of desperate people, but as equals working for change. The image of poverty as a miserable state has been challenged by the expressions of hope and joy from the children for whom survival is a daily challenge.

In the four years since the beginning of this partnership, enough funds have been raised to finance the completion of the main building of the Child Development Center. Students have developed a website for S.G.M. that describes its mission and programs, with information on how to sponsor a child to attend school. Over thirty children have been

sponsored by U.S. donors with the \$130 annual fee to buy books, uniforms, and school supplies required for a child to attend school. In March, a medical team from another state that heard about this partnership will go to provide a two-week primary health clinic in one of the rural villages. An American elementary school has adopted the study of Ghana as a yearly project, and is involved in a pen pal exchange program each year between students. A V.C.U.-sponsored dance performance benefit is being planned for next fall, a community undertaking involving professional dancers, elementary school performers, university service learning classes, community sponsors, and a host of former students who have participated in the service projects in Ghana in the past. A highlight of the performance will be two important guests from Ghana – the Director of the N.G.O and Charles.

So the next time I see Charles, we will have dinner at an American restaurant and we will celebrate all that is possible through service performed in the partnership of a School of Social Work and an NGO working together to change the future of the children of Ghana.

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