

# “Redefining ‘Us’ and Doing Our Part: a Look at the Impact of Student-Led Development Work in the Global South”

By Sarah Burke

Advisor: Loubna Skalli-Hanna

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Abstract: In the first decade of the twenty-first century, student activism has embraced the pervasive impacts of globalization and in many ways is playing a more important role in the world community. More students from the global North are participating in a unidirectional form of transnational activism and contributing not only to sustainable development initiatives abroad, but are also transforming their home communities. Their impact is defining and encouraging a more globalized sense of responsibility in their peers, as well as in the members of their parents' generation. My project seeks to explore the specific impact and sustainability of their activities in both the communities in which they volunteer and their home communities. Students are taking

on a more pro-active role in development work, the potential impact of which is significant for both the wider field of International Development and future of U.S. aid work.

## Introduction

“We’re the first generation of the new millennium; trying to define ourselves not by what has been done in the past, but what we can do in the future... I think this will become the beginning for me.”<sup>1</sup> Matt Michels, a 22 year old student at American University and former volunteer in Nairobi, Kenya, embodies the characteristics of a new and increasingly important type of student activism. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, this particular type of student activism has embraced the pervasive impacts of globalization and in many ways is playing significant role in the world community.

Student activism has undergone a transformation in recent years. More student activists from the global North are participating in a unidirectional form of transnational activism and contributing not only to sustainable development initiatives abroad, but are also transforming their home communities. They are utilizing the skills they have acquired through their volunteer work to continue contributing to the specific development initiatives they were a part of by recruiting their peers to join the causes and raise funding for the projects, disseminating information about the most pressing issues confronting youths in the global South, and encouraging a wider social awareness and commitment to fixing these global problems in their parents and friends.

In many ways, their impact is defining and encouraging a more globalized sense of responsibility. Global concerns have expanded and are crossing borders now in a highly interconnected world; it is impossible to ignore the problems confronting the global South. Students are recognizing and perpetuating a belief that the crisis facing these individuals in the global South will inevitably affect the citizens of the global North as well. Separating ‘us’ and ‘them’ is no longer as easily done as it had been in the past. Student activists are working within

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<sup>1</sup> Michels, Matt. Personal Interview. 20 Feb. 2008.

this context of change and redefining their place in a globalized world, bringing the global issues home.

It is this group of student activists that I will assess. This group embodies the new global perspective and is playing an active role in the field of International Development. Characterized by the transnational interactions that define their work, the individual student activists have enormous potential as actors in the development field and potentially as contributors to aid programs provided by the governments of the global North committed to fighting the crises in the global South.

### Literature Review

For years, scholars have been studying the dynamic and ubiquitous role of students in various types of activism. Over the course of the twentieth century, youths have become increasingly important in the field of activism within the global North. Yet now, in the first decade of the twenty-first century we are seeing youths moving farther away from the field of domestic politics and policy and into roles as transnational activists. In particular, more students from the middle and upper-middle socioeconomic sector in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Ireland are taking on roles as leaders in development work in the global south. It is a unidirectional type of activism that has gained tremendous popularity among not only these students but the peers in their community and has in turn raised numerous questions about the future potential of this type of student-led activism.

In regards to student-led activism, some of the questions scholars have been addressing address the types of activism students are drawn to, how this type of involvement affects a youth's social and psychological development, and how traditional forms of activism are changing in the face of globalization. Most often, however, scholars focus on how student led

activism is driven by and in turn affects the current political environment in the world's most developed countries. This type of assessment is extremely useful for policy makers and explores not only the trends of political participation among college-aged youths in the global North but also incurs discussions about the future role and potential of the next generation of activists and political actors. Nevertheless, despite the plethora of valuable and insightful information, the recent spread of student-led activism into the global South has raised several important questions that have yet to be thoroughly explored.

Before I will address these new questions and concerns, however, I must define the boundaries in which many recent studies are operating. The international definition of youth is any individual below the age of 35.<sup>1</sup> General studies on youth activism, however, tend to focus primarily on a much younger age group, encompassing those in the latter developmental stages of adolescence and young adulthood. Activism has been defined as “efforts to create changes in the behavior of institutions or organizations through action strategies such as lobbying, advocacy, negotiation, protest, campaigning and raising awareness.”<sup>2</sup> It can further be divided into two subcategories: soft activism and hard activism. Soft activism refers more to a promotion of youth participation in all levels of decision making while hard activism is larger demonstrations that vocally establish an opinion.<sup>3</sup> The type of student-led youth activism prevalent in this study encompasses a wider age range (as the definition of a college-aged student is flexible) and a combination of the various forms of activism. Even so, it is still useful to understand the more typical boundaries within which youth activism falls.

Type, location, and motivation are often, if not always, addressed in any study of youth activism. Throughout the twentieth century, the trend was almost exclusively political and civic activism within local and regional communities. Students were most concerned with their home

environment. Now, however, many types of activism have taken on a more global perspective. Even local community projects are incorporating global concerns into their mission statements; some have become quite international in scope. Domestic and international issues are increasingly inseparable and students especially are beginning to embrace the globalization paradigm. It is nearly impossible for college students now to ignore the growing concerns of globalization, as it was impossible for our parents' generation to ignore the dangers and concerns of living during the Cold War. This is filtering into the various types of activism in many ways, especially when the ventures are student-led. Furthermore, student activism is occurring in a context where the influential actors are not only their home governments but also international organizations, multilateral organizations, international activist organizations, multinational corporations, and non-governmental organizations.<sup>4</sup> Students are acting in the context of a new globalized paradigm.

Many prevalent methods of activism today are not far removed from international influences.<sup>5</sup> For example, "edutainment" combines art and media to promote concern for development issues through the use of highly trafficked media forums.<sup>6</sup> Using personalized stories, these students encourage a strong sense of duty, empathy, and responsibility in other youths. Indeed, most contemporary student activism today is incorporating these altered art forms and grassroots leadership<sup>7</sup>; and it is having immense success in reaching a broad spectrum of individuals spanning the socioeconomic stratum.<sup>8</sup> This activism is essentially spurred by an increased awareness of global political concerns. Motivated by their frustration, many students are becoming activists in response to human rights abuses and injustices they have been exposed to and sublimating their energy into these creative forms of activism.<sup>9</sup>

Yet at times this altruistic nature is more a byproduct of other motivating factors. Peer relationships are extremely important to most students at this stage and often the influence of peers' behavior is more important than intrinsic motivation.<sup>10</sup> Over time, however, motivations change and most youth activists become heavily influenced by intrinsic motivations. Student youth activists especially are more inclined to develop a personal connection with their activities for several reasons. As they develop their skills and establish strong personal relationships with those involved, they feel a sense of self worth and identification with the goals.<sup>11</sup> This transformation is integral to the sustainability of student-led activism, and trends have shown that nearly all the students involved progress through the same stages of psychological development in this respect.

Scholars are highly interested in these types of psychological and social development characteristic in student activists, especially in those leading the various types of activism. Many studies focus almost exclusively on this topic, as it holds important implications about the potential efficacy of student activism and its continual impact on the wider community. When participating in any type of activism, students develop social capital that prepares them for "active community life and civic participation."<sup>12</sup> It also develops the students' capability to think strategically and confront challenges that will inevitably arise (especially when working with individuals from different cultural backgrounds) such as: irregular bounded rationality, abstract and opaque human intentions, context specific rules, and unpredictability.<sup>13</sup> Also, it helps students to understand alternate frames for identity, which is especially important when working in a global framework.<sup>14</sup>

Recognizing these benefits to social and psychological development has a practical purpose in the study of student-led youth activism. Certain characteristics, especially the ones

incurred by participation in more globally-oriented forms of activism, strongly correlate with positive effects on the wider community as well as sustained participation in student driven community ventures. These acquired skills help individuals to direct their anger and frustration to constructive ends which benefits the community as a whole.<sup>15</sup> Developing this human capacity has great potential at both the local and international level. Past studies have shown that individuals who develop these skills through activism are more likely to remain involved in service projects in the future. One important question yet to be addressed, however, is which characteristics in particular will be the most valuable and useful for students whose work has become more internationally oriented given the heavy shift in recent years to this type of work.

Throughout these studies, there is a strong underlying question of how the face of activism and the context in which it operates has changed in recent years. Most scholars address only specific changes in the political and international contexts and do not recognize the overarching changes in student activism in general. While scholars focused on the impact of a new political world order, the impacts of globalization on activism, and a strong sense of internationalism that is pervasive in all levels of society (especially for youths) they neglect to delve into the way that specific student-led ventures are impacting the communities in which they volunteer as well as their home communities. Nevertheless, scholars are recognizing that in the context of this new world order there is an assumption that the basic norms defining identity and the self perception of 'your role' in society have been dramatically changed by these recent developments. All of these changes and developments directly impact the trends of student-led youth activism.

Political changes are especially important for current studies of youth activism. As most studies focus on the impact of activism within the political arena, these changes are definitive for



activist currents. First, there has been a strong disillusionment with the efficacy of politics and governmental action among students in the global North. Faith in political participation has eroded dramatically, and many individuals believe their government to be impotent in addressing wider social concerns.<sup>16</sup> Many youths, especially students, have decided to “live their politics” as opposed to waiting for the government to alleviate their frustrations.<sup>17</sup> Second, the changing world order following the collapse of the cold war has redefined political identities and self-perception. As we are no longer living in the context of a zero-sum game, students are confronting a new political and economic context where “stateness” is no longer as clear cut as it has been in the past.<sup>18</sup> This new context, paired with the third important change, globalization, has spurred a more international self perception. Subsequently, students are defining their identity within a new set of boundaries that incorporates the increasingly interconnected natures of domestic and international politics.<sup>19</sup>

All of these changes have strong implications for the future face of student-led activism and the state policies that govern their actions. Given the new context in which youths are defining themselves, there is tremendous potential for them to provide a fresh view and encourage both new forms of action and new ways of framing domestic and international issues.<sup>20</sup> Potentially, supporting youth activism in this context may create a new form of diplomacy that is both credible and effective.<sup>21</sup> However, given the lack of research on the sustainable impact of these student-led projects, scholars remain unsure at this time about the actual potential of this kind of youth activism.

Overall, the literature regarding youth activism seems expansive and thorough. It addresses not only the characteristics of youth activism but also its affect on the individuals involved, the wider community, and the current and future political contexts. Of course, there are

always new and imperative questions that need to be addressed. In many ways, student-led activism has changed dramatically in the first decade of the twenty first century. Often scholars focus more on the symptoms of these changes, not on the inherent differences that now define globalized activism. I believe one reason for this is the rapid and dramatic changes in technology that have disproportionately affected the current college-aged generation. These changes have occurred within the past six years and are redefining the resources and therefore the capabilities of youth activists. In addition to the increased accessibility to cross-continental travel, the prevalence of online social forums and the exponential growth in online news reporting (both official and unofficial) have created an ‘online’ generation of students.

Youths today are living in a world that has facilitated a vast information and communication network. This massive influx of information is coming from all over the world and educating people about global issues they would never have had to face in their daily life. Within the first two days of its website launch, Amnesty International received over 50,000 hits on the internet and now sends two to three emails per minute petitioning on behalf of prisoners of conscience.<sup>22</sup> Youths, and students in particular, have been integral to this information sharing; internet use is widespread and individuals are acquiring vast amounts of information and spreading to their peers in a matter of seconds. Given such tools and resources, there is a tremendous opportunity now more than ever before to facilitate organizations like Amnesty International and “create a grassroots and democratic effort on a scale never before seen to ensure the basic rights of every person in the world.”<sup>23</sup>

Online social networking tools have been integral resource for the increased participation in widespread grassroots activism. Websites such as Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Google, and numerous others have been used by students to understand the problems confronting youths in

the global South, to find information about how they can become actively involved in development initiatives, to spread information to their peers, to network with other activists, and to share their experiences and receive positive reinforcement for their efforts. Ideological currents travel more quickly through these more informal and ad hoc means.<sup>24</sup> All of these forums have been created within the past six years and have altered not only the way activism is conducted but also the magnitude to which it is being conducted. In recent years, transnational youth activism has indeed seen “explosive growth”.<sup>25</sup>

Facebook, created in 2004 by a Harvard student, began as a networking forum for American students alone but now exists on almost every continent with a reported 64 million active users.<sup>26</sup> It includes several features that facilitate and encourage networking and student involvement in various types of activism. One such feature is “Causes” that allow individual members to join a cause, discuss the issues related to that cause in an online forum, organize and publicize events, send out relevant information to massive mailing lists, recruit peers to join the cause, share updated information concerning the issues, and even donate money to the causes. Many of these causes have been joined by hundreds of thousands of members and collected thousands of dollars in donations for the various causes. A majority of these causes are geared specifically towards “International” issues confronting the global South. For example, the UNICEF cause boasted 615,787 members on April 1, 2008 and had collected over \$26,750 in donations.<sup>27</sup>

MySpace, another important online networking forum that was created in 2003 and is now the world’s fifth most popular website, offers similar opportunities for individuals to learn about and participate in various forms of activism—especially transnational activism.<sup>28</sup> There are numerous groups that members may join for this purpose. In the “Nonprofit and

Philanthropic” category, there are 22,406 different groups. which include “People helping People” which acts as a networking forum for activists and has 27,156 members, “Silence is not an Option: Anti-Slavery/Anti-Human Trafficking group” with 14,177 members, and “Save Darfur” which promotes open discussion and action relating to the crisis in Darfur and has 10,154 members.<sup>29</sup>It is wildly popular among students; as of April 1, 2008 there were 230,633,337 members.

Some other interesting venues that help students quickly and efficiently disseminate information include YouTube and Google. YouTube, created in 2005, is a video sharing forum that has had a huge cultural impact worldwide. On average, over 100 million videos are watched daily.<sup>30</sup> This forum has allowed activists to share their work with peers in a very personal way; student activists from the global North are posting videos of the work they are doing in the global South and it has proven to be a highly effective recruiting tool. Especially today, when social networking is increasingly done online, a resource such as YouTube is highly useful. Google has also transformed the capabilities of information sharing and has incurred exponential growth in the field of transnational activism. Now young people are able to type in a simple question or key word related to development issues or activism and return anywhere between thousands and millions of search results.

The speed at which these online forums have spread is astounding and they have changed the potential for widespread student-led transnational activism. In fact, there are more forums encouraging transnational activism than can realistically be counted by any one individual. Online forums such as One Studentry (<http://onestudentry.org>) are being founded every day. One Studentry is a perfect example of how these online forums enable activism, as it acts as a central location for information sharing between the fields of conflict resolution and international

development in Washington, D.C.; hosts a yearly gathering which connects students and professionals in “creative and energizing ways”; maintains a calendar to promote local activism; keeps an updated database that links students, non-governmental organizations, and governmental organizations; and posts the latest news and job listings in the fields of peace and conflict resolution and international development. It is interesting to note that these types of online forums are heavily influencing student activism in general, as many organizations have now created web accounts and online forums to aid their organization.

Clearly activism is not relegated to online forums, but it is indeed aided by them. These forums have encouraged a greater number of individuals to take part in a new trend of transnational activism whereby students from the global North are committing a large amount of time to physically volunteering in impoverished areas of the global South. It is among college-aged students in particular that this type of transnational activism has seen rapid growth.

Despite the wealth of research on student-led youth activism, there is still much that has yet to be thoroughly researched and discussed. And while I will, of course, be unable to cover the plethora of remaining questions, I will attempt to address some of what I feel are the most interesting and definitive of this new form of globalized activism. To do so, I will be looking at two case studies of student-led development work in the global South that is being perpetuated by college students of the global North. In particular I will attempt to address the effect that this type of activism is having on the communities in which these students are volunteering, the impact on their own personal growth and enduring commitment to activism, the ways in which they are transforming not only their home communities but also the awareness and commitment of their parents to the global issues concerning students today and, finally, the political

implications regarding sustainable development initiatives and potentially more effective aid programs provided by the governments of the global North.

### Case Study

These case studies will assess the current trend of student-led development work that has defined a specific subcategory of youth activism. Specifically, I will be focusing on the unidirectional movement of students from the global North who are spending several months volunteering in the global South in an attempt to combat the issues confronting youths in the world's least developed countries. While there are numerous venues through which students may involve themselves, there are two primary venues through which the students in the following case studies are acting: participation through academic exchanges and participation through extra-curricular programs offered by various non-governmental organizations. My hope is that this will shed light on how student activism is being expressed in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, how these students are impacting the communities where they have volunteered, how their personal growth is affected by their involvement in this development work, and how they are transforming their home communities. In doing so, I also anticipate that this will provide an insight into the student's achievements, the challenges they face, and the different ways they approach what they see as the most important issues today.

The two case studies I will now focus on are American University's academic exchange program that places American University students in Nairobi, Kenya and the Suas (a Dublin-based Irish non-profit organization) program that places youths between the ages of 18-25 in Mombasa and Nairobi, Kenya and Calcutta and Delhi, India. Information has been gathered from the individuals working with these organizations and overseas programs, the official websites, and interviews conducted with students who have participated in the program. It was these

interviews that I found to be the most informative and probing; they provided a firsthand look into the motives, general characteristics, and impact of individuals participating in student-led development work in the global South. And while the concept of academic and extra-curricular exchange programs for college students is not new, it has certainly changed in recent years—especially since the end of the Cold War. Universities and organizations across the global North are providing a venue for students (rarely with government support) who wish to volunteer abroad and participate in development work.

Every semester, the American University Enclave program sends between 10 and 12 students to Nairobi, Kenya to take courses at the United States International University and participate in externships throughout the city. Since the program began in the spring of 2005, over 90 students have participated.<sup>31</sup> When the students arrive they are given the option of a variety of externship programs that they may volunteer with. These include several children's homes throughout the city, a non-profit clinic in the Kawangware slum, a domestic training non-profit, various refugee services, or a performing arts non-governmental organization. In each organization, the students work with underprivileged youths, the majority of whom are HIV positive. Each student lives in an apartment in Nairobi for four months, is required to take courses in Kiswahili, must embrace the culture as much as possible through the use of public transport and shopping in the local Kenyan markets, and will receive an evaluation from the individual in charge of the externship at which they have donated their time.

I interviewed two individuals working in different externships to gauge the type of activities that these volunteers are involved in. Micaela Arthur participated in the Enclave program in the spring of 2007 and worked at the Ray of Hope clinic in Kawangware. She worked with teachers and children in a classroom attached to the clinic. While observing the inner

workings of the clinic she also, with her peers, began a weekly support group for women in the slums so that issues of women's health, child rearing, family rights, and nutrition could be openly discussed. In addition, she worked with her peers volunteering in other organizations to engender networking among the organizations. For example, a "fun day" was set up so that children from the Kawangware slum could be transported to Uhuru National Park to watch acrobats from Sarakasi Trust (which primarily trains children from various slums) perform.

According to Micaela, her experiences helped her to better understand what is actually needed for successful sustainable development initiatives. She also found that working in Kawangware gave her a greater focus in terms of personal goals. It is not only that she feels she better understands how to contribute but also that she is more dedicated to "making it happen".<sup>32</sup> Since she has returned in the summer of 2007, Micaela has been working with other individuals who participated in the Nairobi Enclave program on a project to extend the Ray of Hope facilities and build a complete primary school for the children of the Kawangware slum. They are currently fundraising and will be returning to Nairobi for six months beginning in June 2008 to begin their project. In the meantime, they have been securing a large portion of their funding from fellow peers who have participated in volunteer programs abroad as well as friends and family here in the U.S. with whom they have shared their experiences. They have facilitated this by creating a website where people may donate money through a 'paypal' account online that is directly linked to the project's bank account. Micaela has also had much success recruiting support through Facebook groups that she belongs to and email listserves such as the School of International Service Listserve, which people have signed up to in order to receive information regarding programs, events, etc. related to the field of International Service.



Matt Michels also participated in the spring 2007 Nairobi enclave. And while he volunteered with a different organization, a preschool/primary school called St. Vincent that educates and feeds HIV positive children in the Kibera slum; the impact on him of working with these youths was similar. Primarily, he tutored students in the school who had fallen behind in their schoolwork for various reasons. He also spent a large amount of time recruiting friends and family members in the United States to donate money that would cover the children's medical expenses. According to Matt, the experience caused an irreversible change in him. His thinking has become "much more practical" as working directly with non-profit organizations in Nairobi forced him to think more about the logistics of completing aid work.<sup>33</sup> He feels that it has given him skills in coordinating and fundraising that will be essential in the future; he has started his own non-governmental organization that will coordinate different fundraising groups and guide them so that they may donate in effective ways. And while he intends to pursue work in the Peace Corps as well, he will remain actively involved in any form of activism that impacts individuals in Nairobi. Indeed, he asserts that "this will become the beginning of [his] life's work".<sup>34</sup>

American University's program is certainly not the only program placing youths from the most developed countries into slums and underprivileged areas in the least developed countries. Numerous other non-academic programs are providing similar opportunities to students. Furthermore, it is not only programs located in the United States that are encouraging this type of work among its college-aged citizens. The second case study of student activism is of a Dublin-based non-governmental organization called Suas (subsequently, 'suas' is the Irish word for 'up'). Given that the world has in many ways split between the global North and the global South, it is important to look at how non-American students are also partaking in this

development work. This trend is not simply American; it seems to be a more global phenomenon pervasive throughout the plans and dreams of the world's most privileged students.

Suas is a registered Irish charity that was founded in 2002 and is a movement “dedicated to supporting quality education in targeted under-resourced communities... [and] helping individuals fulfill their potential and play meaningful roles in shaping our world.”<sup>35</sup> Programs are run by students in several underprivileged communities in Kenya, India, and Ireland. Since 2002, over 370 volunteers have been sent to work for ten weeks in a primary school in Nairobi, Mombasa, Calcutta, or Delhi and numerous others have participated in programs within Ireland. SUAS also promotes activism within the students' home country and includes a network of 12 societies throughout Ireland that run tutoring programs in underprivileged schools, multicultural programs led by college students who teach weekly programs about diversity and multiculturalism in primary and secondary schools throughout Dublin and Cork, and a refugee mentoring program that pairs students attending Irish colleges with asylum seekers and refugees so the students may teach English and cultural adaptation/adjustment in order to help the asylum seekers and refugees adapt more easily to Irish culture.

According to the president of SUAS, the overseas programs in particular offer “the possibility to develop personal and professional skills... and to learn about the challenges and opportunities of development in our interconnected world.”<sup>36</sup> Yet these programs provide education to not only the student activists. Over 10,000<sup>37</sup> underprivileged children a year in Kenya and India are offered an education because of these SUAS programs. I interviewed three students who participated in these overseas SUAS programs. Much like Micaela and Matt, while their experiences were different, the perceived impact on them as individuals was strikingly similar.

Paul Finnegan was sent to Mombasa, Kenya in the summer of 2006. Since returning from the Kongowea primary school where he tutored the children and helped conduct English language programs, he has initiated and led the refugee mentoring program in Dublin, participated in the tutoring and multicultural programs, and leads the Dublin University, Trinity College SUAS branch as president for the 2007-2008 school year. According to Paul, his time in Kenya has changed him dramatically. He “can’t stand to be so removed” from development work and transnational activism.<sup>38</sup> As with many of the former volunteers, he describes a sense of “volunteer withdrawal” that leaves him feeling as if he is “wasting time” when not involved in some type of activism.<sup>39</sup> There is a resounding sense of frustration and anger in many of these returning students. It does, however, seem to manifest in many positive ways; the students with this frustration typically become actively involved in promoting the programs they were a part of, volunteering, and recruiting peers to participate in development and community service initiatives. Indeed, Paul has not only participated in activism in Dublin but has also gone to both Cambodia and Thailand in the past year, and plans to stay for several months in India this coming summer to continue his work in underprivileged communities.

Stephen Murphy has also felt the draw to community service after his first experience with transnational activism. In the summer of 2006 he tutored the children in the DAS primary school in Calcutta, India. He subsequently became actively involved in the Dublin SUAS programs, acting as the President of the Dublin University, Trinity College branch for the 2006-2007 school year. He considers himself to be “generally more aware” and feels a sense of accomplishment when working with SUAS programs in Dublin.<sup>40</sup> But unlike many of the other students Stephen does not feel that his experiences have dictated the course of his future career goals.

Darren Ryan, however, has followed a path similar to that of Micaela, Matt, and Paul. He participated in the summer 2006 SUAS program with the Sabuj Sangha primary school in Calcutta, India and has become immersed in development work since he has returned. While he studied Business during his college career, Darren was also actively involved in the Dublin University, Trinity College SUAS program. He created a promotional video for SUAS, participated in the refugee mentoring program, and attended the inter-varsity events that encouraged open discussion about development issues among students from all the different SUAS societies in Ireland. Now he leads the SUAS alumni group that continues to promote greater awareness in the local community and fundraises to support the schools abroad. He has also moved away from business studies and after graduation began working for Irish charity, Niall Mellon Township Trust, which sends skilled workers to South Africa to aid local community members and build thousands of homes each summer. His goal is to continue learning from Niall Mellon for another year before moving to East Timor to continue working in the field of development.<sup>41</sup>

Despite the fact that each of these individuals was involved in a different location, with a different organization, there seems to be undeniable characteristics that have emerged since he or she has returned to his or her home country. They assert that all of their initiatives both before and after they completed their individual programs were widely supported by their peers. This seems to be a distinct cultural trend among students today. These students are encouraging greater activism and participation in the field of sustainable development and using the new advances in technology to support the development initiatives they have been involved in, recruit their peers, spread information, and find a support system among fellow activists who wish to share their experiences. The most important question now is how these trends and characteristics

are redefining the students' perceptions of what is the most valuable and needed type of activism now, establishing a strong and confident self-image, shaping a more global perspective, and influencing the student's continued commitment to activism. Furthermore, I feel it is also extremely important to address the policy implications and potential of this dynamic group of individuals?

Sarah Burke

### Discussion and Conclusions

Under secretary general for the United Nations, José Antonio Ocampo, asserted in 2005 that “young people hold the key to society's future” and professed his hopes that leaders would eventually recognize the immense potential and “untapped resources” within this group for the future of development initiatives.<sup>42</sup> Today, these young people are in fact impacting the field of International Development in many ways. Students are establishing a new standard for youth activism and moving their work into the international arena. By actively leading development initiatives in the global South, they are expanding their resources and subsequently impacting their home communities in a transformative way. It seems that this unidirectional transnational student activism is not only ‘in vogue’ but has become a branch of legitimate aid work both within their home countries and abroad.

One of the most imperative questions is whether or not these students are actually leaving a sustainable impact on the communities in the global South where they are volunteering. I believe the answer to this is yes. While it is impossible to accurately assess the full potential of their efforts now, the results we do see are promising. First, the personal connections and friendships that many of the students are making with other youths while volunteering keeps them, according to previous volunteers, very connected to the not only the culture but the

challenges facing their host country as well. Much of the research on student and youth activism has highlighted the importance of personal relationships and sheds light on why these relationships directly affect the sustainability of these initiatives. Strong personal relationships and friendships establish a network of trust that allows the students to more effectively tutor and support youths in the host country.

Another indication that this student led development work will continue to leave a lasting impact in the host countries is that students, upon their return, are utilizing social networking tools to continue working with the youths in their host country and to recruit their peers to get involved in their development projects. Peer influence is an incredibly effective way to increase the amount of activists and also to encourage open discussion and a free-flow of information regarding the real issues. Subsequently, within the past decade ‘social awareness’ has grown in popularity and is now a popularly valued characteristic, especially among students. Even media forums like Mtv are popularizing wider social awareness; it is no longer acceptable to ignore the issues, especially those affecting individuals in the global South. Furthermore, current student activists are taking advantage of the fact that global activism and development initiatives are extremely ‘in vogue’ right now and are using these popular media resources to support this trend and encourage more widespread participation. Within the next decade it is possible that we will see even greater participation and more resources flooding the field of International Development.

Yet if this trend is widespread among the general population, why focus on student-led development work and activism? Are they in fact any more effective or different from other activists partaking in transnational volunteerism? The answer to this lies in the general characteristics that define these students, as well as their particular type of commitment.

First, this is a more cost effective type of participation; the trend is that many of these students are funding themselves. While this relegates much of the activism to a distinct socio-economic bracket (of generally upper-middle class youths) there are an increasing number of venues for students to find funding and sponsorship for transnational volunteering. For example, many of the youths participating in Suas programs “bag pack”. They visit department and grocery stores throughout Dublin and ask for donations from customers whose bags they pack. Many of the students can earn over 1000 Euro in one day of bag packing.<sup>43</sup>

Another characteristic of these youths is that they have not become disillusioned because of the difficulties inevitably confronting individuals participating in development work. They can bring a fresh energy and adaptability, as well as a familiarity with the technology that can facilitate and expand development initiatives. Also, the duration of their activism abroad is relegated to a short period of two to four months, which grants them enough time to learn about the culture and issues without having to take responsibility for the enduring challenges facing the various projects. The trend among returning activists is a continued vigor for confronting the issues, possibly because they have yet to face the emotional and psychological challenges that long term activists and workers in the field of development confront.

Students participating in American University’s Nairobi enclave and the Suas program have put this vigor into a variety of new programs and projects that are, to say the least, inspiring. For example, the refugee mentoring program that Paul Finegan created with the help of the Jesuit ministries in Dublin has paired nearly one hundred college students with around 150 refugees and asylum seekers. Another example is the large project that Micaela is taking on with several other Nairobi enclave students who have since returned to the U.S. They are running the entire project: raising funding, recruiting other students to contribute to the project, attempting to

network with other non-governmental organizations, and even moving back to Nairobi to address the logistical problems and begin the physical building of the school facility.

Nevertheless, there are undeniable challenges facing transnational youth activism. One of the most important issues is the location in which this transnational activism is occurring. Many of these college students with very little experience are volunteering in some of the most impoverished, and often dangerous, areas in the world. In some instances these youths may in fact be more of a liability than an asset to these non-governmental organizations. These dangers limit what these student activists can do while abroad. However, there are precautions that can be and are taken by both the students and individuals running these various volunteer programs. These young activists all work with experienced professionals and over the course of these volunteer programs there have been very few instances when the students have had to confront danger and violence.

Another challenge is the possibility that this is just another passing fad. Will transnational volunteerism fall out of style when the enthusiasm fades? While it is possible, it seems more likely that this type of activism may change location but will not cease entirely. As the civil and women's rights movements did not become passé until advances had been made, I think that these global concerns will not fade until some measurable progress has been made. Undeniably, however, this is a much more expansive issue than either the civil or women's rights movements in the United States and there are far fewer resources to combat it. Still, given the seeming omnipresence of the media and prominence of these development concerns in popular culture it is possible that these issues will not fall from popular view. In a globalized world (and especially given the increased interdependence all citizens have in a globalized economic order), I don't think that students in the global North will be able to ignore the development issues confronting



their peers in the global South. Indeed, the concept of 'us' has now expanded beyond the boundaries of nationality and ethnicity. Furthermore, students are presented with these global issues daily. My experience as a student activist in the global North has been that these issues are present on every music channel, on my college campus, and even at social events; these concerns have quickly become a part of my daily life.

One final and important challenge is the question of the legitimacy of student-led development work. How effective can these youths actually be? Furthermore, aren't people with more experience much more efficient? From my own experience as a student activist abroad, I feel that I did in fact take away more than I could have contributed to the environment. My participation taught me a great deal about sustainable development and the challenges that one will inevitably face in the field. I was very inexperienced and often fumbled through assignments. Furthermore, I took time away from the experienced workers who had to correct my mistakes and teach me how to properly accomplish tasks such as writing a grant proposal. Yet while we are waiting to see the long term impact of this unidirectional student activism on both the host country and home country, it would be rash to assume that this type of investment and training is not exceedingly valuable. Perhaps these youths will be the primary actors in the field of International Development in the future, and the benefits of their experience cannot be truly appreciated now. Furthermore, these students are not depleting the number of current experienced professionals when they volunteer. Since they are not straining the resources of these various charitable organizations, any contribution can be seen as positive.

If we can effectively confront the challenges that this type of activism raises, the most important question now is: What are the policy implications of this type of activism? If we do begin to see the results of this group's potential and they are indeed positive, whose

responsibility is it to further encourage this type of participation and what type of actions should be taken to do so? I think the question of responsibility will remain puzzling because in many ways this type of activism is heavily influenced by and tied to a wide variety of actors. Instead, addressing what actions should be taken is much more feasible and will also shed light on who should or could be responsible for helping these youths.

Action Suggestions:

*Greater networking between these youth based initiatives/organizations:*

Effectively networking these various initiatives and organizations could be a strong way to encourage growth and continued participation. Online networking forum One Studentry is a prime example of how extensive networking can help facilitate more expansive projects within the community, as well as helping former volunteers and activists stay involved and proactive in these initiatives. If various groups such as SUAS and the Nairobi enclave were to reach out and work together, for example, they could ease many of the burdens they face by sharing numerous resources. Furthermore, they could expand their work into wider communities—if the students working with the Gatoto school in the Mukuru Kwa Reuben slum and the students working with the Ray of Hope clinic in the Kawangware slum were to share their resources and work together, they could provide many more people with the healthcare and school services that they are lacking because they do not have access to the facilities in the opposing slum. Networking between these organizations has tremendous potential.

*Providing more resources to these various programs would be an investment in not only development initiatives but also in more socially aware and responsible citizens:*

Universities should be encouraging greater participation in such programs. It will be a strong way to train students interested in pursuing careers in International Development. Furthermore, it

will help encourage proactive social responsibility and may foster the concept within students that they are part of a wider global community. Various governments should also consider the potential of this group of individuals as a source for greater funding as part of a commitment to global development. The resources required to help students participate in this transnational activism are minimal compared to the resources currently being spent on programs such as democracy promotion, the positive outcome of which is highly contested. These types of programs not only require a minimum input for a potentially large output but are also less likely to be regarded as invasive and arrogant by the wider international community. The perception of the “Ugly American” is still very prominent throughout the world. Scholarly research argues—and my own experiences abroad support the concept—that individuals across the world see Americans as arrogant, inconsiderate, selfish, and ignorant individuals when dealing with the world outside of their borders. Other nations such as Ireland are regarded as more outward looking, and are widely recognized for their commitment to development initiatives in the least developed countries. I think that supporting volunteer programs such as Suas and the Nairobi enclave would positively impact the general perceptions of Americans abroad.

The potential benefits of these programs are innumerable. I believe that our society as a whole would be positively affected by an increase in the number of students actively participating in development programs and initiatives both at home and abroad. Of course there will continue to be both challenges and limitations on how much these youths can achieve. Nevertheless I think it would behoove us to at least explore this potential. We have more resources than we have ever before had to combat the various issues confronting the global South and any type of participation that attempts to aid in this fight should be encouraged. Any

contribution is better than no contribution; even the world's most prominent and influential activists have to start somewhere.

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