



Volunteering for development: Tensions around conducting multi-sited ethnography with volunteers

DR NICHOLE GEORGEOU*
AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

1. SUMMARY OF RESEARCH AND PARTNERS

Between 2006 and 2009 I undertook a comprehensive case study of Palms Australia (referred to as Palms), a non-profit International Volunteer Sending Agency (IVSA)¹ established in 1961. As the recipient of the PhD scholarship attached to an Australian Research Council (ARC) Industry Linkage Grant between Palms and the University of Wollongong (UOW), I tracked a cohort of 13 development volunteers as they moved through the volunteer cycle. Palms had received ongoing Australian Government funding to support their volunteer sending programs, but at the time of the study it had not been successful in its most recent tender and was not awarded government funding.

The research concerned long-term development volunteering, a practice that involves a time commitment of 18 months and over, is usually spent overseas or in a developing community, has a development objective, and takes programmatic form (Moore McBride et al., 2003: 176). The study used a multi-sited ethnographic approach, adopting Marcus's (1995) concept of following an idea through its multiple locales. The idea of development volunteering was critically interrogated at several sites: the international context; the national context through Australian Government policy documents; the Palms organisational context; and through in-depth interviews with volunteers and several local people in the countries where the volunteers were placed. The experiences of the 13 Palms volunteers were examined, and their changing conceptions of development were presented and critically analysed as they moved through the stages of recruitment, preparation and orientation into placements in Timor-Leste and Papua New Guinea, and on their return to Australia. Research focused on the nature and character of long-term community-based development volunteer programs, and on the role that these have in contributing to Australia's regional linkages in Asia and the Pacific region.

2. RATIONALE AND PURPOSE

A central feature of the study was assessing how development volunteers understood and implemented notions of participatory development and building a 'global civil society'. Conceptualising the relationship between the organisation and its volunteers was a research priority. As a civil society organisation (CSO), Palms provided important insights into conceptions of dominance and dependency in the global political economy, as well as the impact of transnational processes (Markowitz, 2001: 40).

Maintaining the organisation's confidence in the research was crucial, particularly because this type of long-term organisational study was new in the field of development volunteering. The absence of previous research of this kind had been linked to organisational concerns around continued government funding

* Nichole Georgeou is currently a Lecturer of International Development and Global Studies at the Australian Catholic University. Nicole was a member of the Palms Australia Executive Board of Directors (2011–2014).

¹ International Volunteer Sending Agency (IVSA) was the term developed at a writing workshop 30 June – 2 July 2006, designed to workshop papers developed at the 'Human Security and Development in Marginal Communities: A National Workshop on Volunteering Abroad in the Asia Pacific' in November 2005 at the University of Wollongong.





(Devereux, 2008: 361), which raised the issue of ethical concerns about the reporting of findings without fear of repercussions to future funding flows. Palms had approved a pilot study in 2004 with the UOW that interviewed returned volunteers about their experiences while in-country. Palms was interested in self-reflection and best practice, and by 2006 the organisation was also aware that its tender for ongoing government funding had been unsuccessful. This meant that it could take the risk to open itself up fully to the scrutiny of independent policy-related academic research without affecting its funding base.

The study explored how the Palms volunteer program resonated, if at all, with wider development discourses. This focus required obtaining a clear understanding of the way in which the organisation's philosophies and ideologies played out in the structure of the organisation, its volunteer sending program, and how Palms Australia interpreted and responded to the Australian policy environment in which it is enmeshed, particularly how the loss of government funding and the new tendering for volunteer contracts had affected the organisation's practices.

The case study of Palms focused on the following goals:

- To examine the relationship between Palms and its volunteers, particularly the impact of the Palms preparation and orientation process on the manner in which its volunteers understand their role in development
- To describe and critically analyse the development volunteers' views of their purpose in the field
- To describe and critically analyse the experiences of development volunteers in the field, particularly their concerns and issues
- To describe and critically examine the development education role of volunteers within the Australian community prior to departure, while in the field, and upon their return to Australia.

The study also sought to make 'local' voices heard, as they are a significant part of the context in which the individual volunteer's ideas about development mature.

3. ETHICAL CHALLENGE

The core ethical research issues that arose in this study were around research integrity, specifically, issues of overcoming bias, confidentiality and consent.

Overcoming bias: The role of an ethnographer is to reveal the multiple truths apparent in the lives of others. At the same time, social research is a participative endeavour as it is impossible to study the social world without being a part of it. Tension in defining the research position in relation to Palms – the 'industry' partner and funding contributor – revolved around the desire to fit into the organisation, and the critical analytical role of an academic researcher. The former involved forming relationships of trust and respect with the organisation; the latter required asking questions that were taken for granted as 'common sense' by Palms staff, especially when related to the organisation's understanding and practice of development. Blurring of the researcher's critical perspective is a common problem in the study of CSOs, and often occurs because researchers are attracted to organisations that share values that conform to their own worldview (Markowitz, 2001). I was mindful that critical analysis could be hindered as I held some of the same beliefs and assumptions as Palms staff.

To address the potential for bias throughout the research, field notebooks were used as a reflective tool to recognise the 'consistent tension between assuming certain knowledge and learning anew' (Ganguly-Scrase, 2011: 34). Further, the long-term nature of the study meant conducting research within a constantly shifting field of unstable relationships. Over the course of the study, genuine friendships developed





between some of the Palms volunteers and myself. This was identified by Palms, and by myself, as creating a site of potential bias in the research, because the data derived from those with whom I maintained close personal friendships was richer than from those with whom I had less of a rapport, and if not recognised and addressed, might have skewed results.

Confidentiality and consent: The connection between relationship, trust and access was central to my research process. 'Access' in the research process is qualified, and the ways in which it is qualified has specific meaning (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992: 33). Reflection on the reasons and motives behind Palms's guarding of certain field sites and not others was a means of better understanding the values of the organisation. As the research project was a collaborative one, access to the physical sites that Palms occupied – such as its office, Fair Trade Café, meetings, and events – did not pose significant problems. Palms staff actively supported the research by answering a broad range of questions about themselves and the IVSA context, as well as allowing access to their organisational files.

Beneficence: Despite not receiving government funding, Palms was still keen to be funded by government and did not want the research findings to jeopardise this objective. It saw its development work as benefitting others, and my obligation became to assist them to understand and improve their practice.

4. RESPONSE AND APPROACH

Ethics approval for a preliminary study in 2004 on Palms's returned volunteers was obtained from the University of Wollongong Office of Research (Ethics Approval No: HE 04/182). This was extended to cover the ARC Linkage grant.

Overcoming bias: Questions regarding my subjectivity as a researcher were addressed through the systematic arrangement and presentation of the data, particularly by applying triangulation. This was an ongoing process occurring between 2006 and 2009. The triangulation process enabled me to examine the research question from more than one perspective in order to test the validity of the data obtained.

The interviews and field visits represented what I observed, what the volunteers were thinking about and feeling, and what they chose to disclose to me at that particular point in time. The interviews and fieldnotes were triangulated within the context of the literature on development and cross-national volunteering, government and Palms's organisational policy, and 'other views' – those of counterparts and partners, as well as volunteers from other organisations and representatives from other organisations. Interview transcripts were checked and approved by participants. Interviews were coded and checked against each other so as to either validate emerging trends or to highlight inconsistencies. Similarly, assumptions within the literature or policy etc. were also referenced against the findings in the interviews.

Confidentiality and consent: Palms asked its volunteers to participate in the research and allowed restricted access to their files. Palms was understandably very protective of the files of volunteers, many of which contained personal correspondence between the Palms in-country co-ordinator and the volunteer. The in-country co-ordinator explained that this correspondence concerned tensions between the partner and the volunteer, and issues concerning volunteer management of culture shock. Even though volunteers signed consent forms stating that they were willing to participate in the research, permission to view volunteers' personal files still had to be negotiated carefully with the Director and Country Programs Manager. My access was restricted to the documents that were available to the board of directors. These included the volunteer's placement description and any documented changes to this; and 6-, 12-, and 18-month evaluations of the placement undertaken from the perspectives of both the volunteer and the in-country partner.





Palms staff, development volunteers, and their in-country counterparts gave their consent with the understanding that they were free to withdraw at any time during the study if they wished, and if they did so, the data concerning them would be withdrawn and destroyed. All participants were provided with full information as to the purpose of the study and how the outcomes would be used, and they signed consent forms. All participants had the right to reject my presence and were able to terminate their interviews at any time.

Confidentiality was guaranteed to participants, and they were made aware that the data collected would be used solely for the purpose of the study. While the research refers to the IVSA studied as 'Palms Australia', anonymity of participants was ensured by the use of pseudonyms. No individual was identified, unless they had given written permission. All field notes, analytical logs, transcripts and any other identifying information were handled only by myself, and kept in a locked filing cabinet in a locked office.

Beneficence: Maintaining a relationship of trust required sustaining the organisation's confidence in the thoroughness and integrity of the research process, and in me as a researcher. This was achieved by having a regular weekly presence at the Palms office in Sydney, and through ongoing communication and engagement with the organisation to keep them informed of the progress of the research, to address any concerns about research methodology and approach, or any changes in the focus of the research. Articles considered of interest to the organisation and myself were exchanged, as was information on the participants and their experiences. With respect to the latter, confidentiality wishes of the participants were respected at all times.

5. OUTCOME AND ONGOING CONSIDERATIONS

The study highlighted a number of lessons related to ethical issues.

Overcoming bias: I had shared the intensely personal growth of Palms volunteers as they grappled with the complexity of development practice and changing worldviews. Representing their voices was a hugely important ethical consideration, as their accounts of development were central to the research, which was also a PhD thesis and later became a book. In all cases, maintaining the integrity of the voice of research participants was vital. Special attention should be paid to the subjectivity of the researcher, who should engage at all times throughout the research process in reflective practice, and this approach should be incorporated into the research methodology and influence the method used.

Confidentiality and consent: Dealing with human subjects always creates ethical issues surrounding disclosure of information and identification of individuals. The decision to provide pseudonyms removed some of these problems. Further, a clear explanation of the project's aims and how the data will be stored and used are important to establish trust and confidence in the researcher, as well as the research project. All participants should have the opportunity to withdraw at any time, and they should also have the capacity to make decisions about which of their files or data should be provided to the researcher.

Beneficence: Palms is an international development volunteering organisation. Its volunteer cohort had diverse motivations, but all wanted to 'do good', and the organisation as a whole has a mission of social justice. As such, the research needed to provide the organisation with a critical understanding of its existing practices, so that it could continue its work in developing countries, and in Australia, more effectively. Giving Palms regular updates and feedback allowed it to engage with the research process in a meaningful way, and to use the findings for its own purposes. Apart from these meetings, Palms was given a copy of the PhD thesis, and later the book of the project, *Neoliberalism, Development and Aid Volunteering*





(Georgeou, 2012). I served on the Palms Board between 2011 and 2014 and continue to facilitate organisational linkages between Palms and the Australian Catholic University.

REFERENCES

- Devereux, P (2008). 'International Volunteering for Development and Sustainability: Outdated paternalism or a radical response to globalisation?', *Development in Practice*, 18(3): pp. 357–370.
- Ganguly-Scrase, R (2011). *Global Issues, Local Contexts: The Rabi Das of West Bengal*. Orient Longman, New Delhi.
- Glesne, C, & Peshkin, A (1992). *Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An Introduction*, Longman, White Plains, NY.
- Georgeou, N (2012). *Neoliberalism, Development and Aid Volunteering*, Routledge, New York.
- Marcus, GE (1995). 'Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24: pp. 95–117.
- Markowitz, L (2001). 'Finding the Field: Notes on the Ethnography of NGOs', *Human Organisation*, 60(1): pp. 40–46.
- Moore McBride, A, Benitez, C, et al. (2003). 'Civic Service Worldwide: Social Development Goals and Partnerships', *Social Development Issues*, 25(1/2): pp. 175–188.
- Palms Australia (2014). *Palms Encounters*, Available at: <http://www.palms.org.au/encounters/>, accessed 9 December 2014.



The Australian Council for International Development (ACFID)

14 Napier Close, Deakin ACT 2600

Private Bag 3, Deakin ACT 2600 Australia

P: +61 2 6285 1816

F: +61 2 6285 1720

E: main@acfid.asn.au

www.acfid.asn.au