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# The relationship between volunteer tourism and development in Thailand

## Abstract

*Short-term international voluntary service is frequently linked to development discourse in the literature on volunteer tourism and the marketing materials of organizations that offer short-term volunteer opportunities. This paper explores the relationship between volunteer tourism and development in Thailand, and assesses the role played by development in the motivations and experiences of volunteers. Based on interviews with 55 volunteer tourists in the northern Thai province of Chiang Mai, this paper argues that although development remains an important element of voluntary service in some parts of the world, the expectations, activities, and impacts of volunteer tourists in Thailand are best understood through the framework of international community service rather than through a developmental framework.*

*Key words: community service; development; international volunteering; volunteer tourism; Thailand*

## Introduction

The number of people participating in international voluntary service has exploded in the past two decades. One study estimates that there are 1.6 million international volunteers per year (TRAM, 2008, p. 5), while another states that over one million individuals from the United States alone volunteer abroad annually (Lough, 2010, p. 1). Lough, McBride, Sherraden and O'Hara (2011, p. 121) define international voluntary service as "an organized period of engagement and contribution to society, organized by public or private organizations, by volunteers who work across an international border, and who receive little or no monetary compensation." There are many types of international volunteers, ranging from those spending one or two years on official development projects, to those participating in part-time service while on holiday. In much of the literature on international voluntary service, short-term volunteering – generally considered service that lasts eight weeks or less – is treated synonymously as volunteer tourism, a form of tourism in which vacation activities are complemented by voluntary service in local communities. Though the concept of volunteer tourism may carry certain negative connotations to those writing about international development volunteers (Devereux, 2008), it is nevertheless an accurate and by now well-established framework for assessing the motivations, expectations, and impacts of short-term volunteers.

The view that volunteer tourism is associated with development is common in the literature on short-term international voluntary service. Several authors (Benson & Wearing, 2012; Conran, 2011) characterize volunteer tourism as a development strategy, while others call it a form of international development (Wearing & Grabowski, 2011), a development instrument (Wearing, 2010), or tourism

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with a development agenda (Vodopivec & Jaffe, 2011). The perceived connection between volunteer tourism and development is understandable in light of the promotional materials of organizations offering short-term volunteer opportunities. In their examination of the mission statements and program principles of a dozen not-for-profit volunteer tourism sending organizations, Ong, Pearlman, and Lockstone-Binney (2011) found that community and development were the two words most frequently mentioned in the text. Others, by contrast, have argued that development is rarely mentioned explicitly by volunteer sending agencies, but that allusions to development predominate through concepts such as helping others, 'giving back,' and the nearly ubiquitous expression 'making a difference' (Simpson, 2004). Coupled with the direction of short-term volunteer flows from North to South (Guttentag, 2011), as well as the participation of volunteers in activities associated with development (such as construction, conservation, education, and health care), these expressions of humanitarian intent, along with such concepts as 'saving' or 'changing' the world, represent key tropes in the marketing of volunteer sending organizations and signal to many a direct relationship between volunteer tourism and development.

This paper assesses the nature of the relationship between volunteer tourism and development in northern Thailand, and gauges the importance of development to volunteer tourists and the organizations that facilitate short-term volunteer experiences. Despite being one of the world's top ten destinations for volunteer tourism, and the second most popular in Asia after India (Keese, 2011; Tomazos & Butler, 2009), Thailand has received attention from only a handful of scholars interested in volunteer tourism (Broad, 2003; Conran, 2011; Coren & Gray, 2012; Mostafanezhad, 2013a). Further, most studies of volunteer tourism that discuss the impact of short-term volunteering on communities tend to either assume the primacy of development as a motivation among volunteers, or tend to frame such discussions solely through the analytical lens of development. This paper argues that although development – defined as long-term, structural economic, political, and social transformation – remains an element of volunteer tourism in some parts of the global South, there are many other, equally important, factors driving the growth of international voluntary service in Thailand.

Besides thinking relatively little about development, *per se*, short-term volunteers in northern Thailand are motivated only partly (and not even significantly) by a concern to effect change and make a positive difference in other people's lives. Moreover, while some volunteers characterize or conceive of their service as development work, many others envision it as something different, namely basic community service meant to provide small, immediate, and mostly one-off benefits for other individuals. While these outcomes could of course be considered constitutive of larger development efforts, it is important to note that volunteer tourists interviewed for this research downplay the connection between short-term volunteering and development, and also avoid describing their voluntary service in ways that represent either an acceptance or rejection of development as a guiding principal. Framing volunteer tourism as travel with brief periods of international community service, rather than as a development strategy or tool, not only provides an alternative lens with which to assess short-term volunteering in popular middle-income tourism destinations such as Thailand, but also avoids placing unreasonable expectations on unskilled and untrained short-term volunteer tourists who, even under the best of circumstances, remain largely incapable of addressing highly complex and difficult development problems in any substantive manner.

## Conflicting views on the relationship between development and short-term voluntary service

Despite the consensus among scholars and practitioners that development is a central component of short-term international voluntary service, there exists great debate surrounding the question of whether this relationship is beneficial or harmful. In the early-2000s, when studies of volunteer tourism began to proliferate, the prevailing view of volunteer tourism's contribution to development was positive. In one of the first comprehensive studies of the topic, Wearing (2001) argues that volunteer tourism offers new paths to sustainable development and leads the way in providing sustainable environmental management for tourism. In subsequent work, Wearing portrays volunteer tourism as a 'decommodified' experience (Wearing & Ponting, 2009) that promotes the following development-related benefits: the facilitation of equal and mutually beneficial relationships between volunteer tourists and members of local communities (Wearing & Grabowski, 2011), the establishment of development and conservation projects defined and driven by the community (Wearing, 2010), and the creation of sustainable ecotourism that is small scale, results in minimal impacts, and avoids harming the environment on which ecotourism depends (Wearing, 2004).

Several authors (Barbieri, Santos & Katsube, 2012; McGehee & Andereck, 2009) point out that volunteer tourism can provide economic benefits to marginalized communities; even though such contributions are often small, they can go a long way in assisting individuals who suffer from a lack of income-generating opportunities. Volunteer tourism can also contribute to social development (McIntosh & Zahra, 2007; Singh & Singh, 2004) while enhancing community capital and mobilizing the community to engage in beneficial development activities (Zahra & McGehee, 2013). In their study of organizations in Peru that host short-term volunteers, Lough *et al.* (2011) found that volunteers contribute to organizational capacity in several ways, including providing labor in times of shortages, introducing new ideas, increasing intercultural competence of clients and staff, sharing technical or professional skills, and providing resources that help sustain organizations.

Research on the impacts of international voluntary service on the volunteers themselves has also demonstrated a connection between volunteer tourism and efforts to promote social justice or tackle structural problems associated with development. Zahra (2011) believes that the self-discovery made possible by volunteer tourism leads in turn to an awareness among volunteers of their role in fostering social justice and equity, poverty alleviation, and global solidarity. Comparable to this sanguine view are the arguments that volunteer tourism leads to consciousness-raising experiences (McGehee, 2012), encourages social movement participation and activism (McGehee & Santos, 2005), and carries the potential to alter social and human-environmental relations (Higgins-Desbiolles & Russell-Mundine, 2008). Aside from arguing that short-term volunteers foster positive development outcomes for host communities, advocates also assume that volunteers are motivated principally by a desire to engage in development work, whether this means signing up for projects explicitly devoted to development initiatives such as poverty alleviation (Wearing, 2001) or participating in service activities meant to give back, make a difference, or improve the quality of life in communities located in developing countries (Mittelberg & Palgi, 2011).

Like advocates of volunteer tourism, critics exhibit great (but ultimately unmet) expectations of volunteer tourists, and take at face value claims by volunteer sending organizations regarding both the importance to volunteers of achieving development outcomes, and the belief among organizations and volunteers alike that this new, more seemingly humanitarian form of tourism is equipped to bring about fundamental improvements in the lives of poor and marginalized communities. These critics assert that, in the end, despite its lofty moral discourse, volunteer tourism fails to alter inequitable North-South relations or address chronic economic, social, and political problems facing low-income countries (Ingram, 2011; Jakubiak, 2011; Zavitz & Butz, 2011). Additionally, rather than embodying and acting upon altruistic principles, as claimed by some advocates (Mustonon, 2005), volunteer tourists instead concern themselves chiefly with their own self-development, which prevents them from adequately reflecting on issues like structural inequality, solidarity, reciprocity, and social justice (Tiessen & Heron, 2012). At the local and organizational levels, volunteer tourism can also disrupt local economies, encourage changes in cultural preferences, and place undue burdens on hosting agencies (Guttentag, 2009).

A common criticism of volunteer tourism relates to its perpetuation of international relationships that reflect and convey neocolonial power disparities (Lyons, Hanley, Wearing & Neil, 2012; Tiessen, 2012), patterns of dependency (Guttentag, 2011), and discursive constructions of the 'Other' (Simpson, 2005). A target of many critiques is the arrogant and paternalistic belief that short-term volunteers – most of whom are unskilled, young, and poorly informed regarding development issues – possess solutions to problems facing poor countries (Jakubiak, 2012; Mostafanezhad, 2013b; Snee, 2013). On a related note, critics point out that the discourse and practice of volunteer tourism solidifies neocolonial, binary distinctions between, on the one hand, poor 'Third World' countries in need of external assistance, and on the other, advanced Western countries that can and should offer this assistance (Sin, 2010). As Lough (2013), Perold, Graham, Mavungu, Cronin, Muchemwa and Lough (2012), and Raymond and Hall (2008) illustrate, the depiction of short-term volunteers as different, superior, and benevolent not only places poor countries in a passive position of need, but also potentially leads to the internalization of feelings of inferiority among the local recipients of volunteers' charity.

Besides reproducing colonial relationships between North and South, volunteer tourism is also accused of advancing a neoliberal agenda. While some advocates claim that volunteer tourism offers a way to resist neoliberal models of tourism and research (Wearing & Ponting, 2009), several critics maintain that instead of subverting the market logic of neoliberalism, or the structural inequalities exacerbated by neoliberal policies, volunteer tourism implicitly accepts and extends the ideological foundations that contribute to these very structural inequalities (Baillie Smith & Laurie, 2011; Conran, 2011; Sin, 2009). Arguing that gap-year volunteer programs reinforce global patterns of uneven and unequal development, Simpson (2004) states that the processes and relationships that allow young westerners to volunteer in the 'Third World' are the same ones that make the reverse process nearly impossible. In a similar vein, Lyons *et al.* (2012) argue that by focusing on skill development and career enhancement, exposing vast power and status inequalities between privileged volunteers and hosts, and promoting the commodification of experiences, gap year volunteer programs propagate a neoliberal ethos, which is inimical to global citizenry and cross-cultural understanding.

An emerging line of critique in the literature on volunteer tourism focuses on the ways in which neoliberal market-based approaches to solving problems, in particular ethical consumerism, shape the belief that responsible lifestyle choices and acts of personal morality constitute effective and sufficient political action (Conran, 2011; Vodopivec & Jaffe, 2011). Consistent with this view is the argument that volunteer tourism represents a rejection of not only the collective action and grand narratives associated with traditional politics, but also transformative, modernization approaches to development (Butcher, 2011). Using the concept of 'life politics,' which is a politics centered on lifestyle and self-actualization, Butcher and Smith (2010) characterize the impulse among volunteer tourists to make a difference as an example of the moralization and politicization of daily lifestyle choices. Further, by so heavily emphasizing humble acts aimed at making a difference, volunteer tourism is said to stand in opposition to macro-political efforts to engender social transformation and economic growth in the global South, while at the same time equating personal acts of charity to development (Butcher & Smith, 2010). As a result of its apolitical approach to development, volunteer tourism is accused of failing to challenge the underlying causes of structural inequality, and absolves volunteers of any responsibility or incentive to take action since poverty is seen in ways that are sentimental and apolitical (Crossley, 2012; Mostafanezhad, 2013a).

## Methods

This paper is based on ethnographic research conducted between December, 2012 and March, 2013, and then again in December and January, 2014, in the northern Thai province of Chiang Mai. Chiang Mai provides an excellent setting in which to study the motivations and values of short-term international volunteers because, in addition to being one of the country's most prominent international tourism destinations, Chiang Mai also attracts more foreign volunteers than any other part of Thailand. In Keese's (2011, p. 265) study of online postings of international volunteer opportunities, Chiang Mai was the leading site in Asia, and accounted for 37 percent of all postings in Thailand. Chiang Mai's reputation among foreign visitors as a highly livable city has resulted in a large number of expatriates moving to this area, many of whom founded or currently work with non-governmental organizations (NGOs). In general, NGOs in Chiang Mai provide services to those struggling to capture the rewards of Thailand's tremendous economic growth of the past several decades. NGOs in northern Thailand are particularly active in reaching out to groups that suffer from enduring economic, social, and political marginalization: most notable among these groups are members of indigenous 'hilltribe' communities, and persecuted ethnic minorities, such as the Shan, that are forced to leave Myanmar and enter northern Thailand as refugees or undocumented migrants. As a middle-income country experiencing rapid improvements in material conditions, Thailand has fewer developmental problems than it once did. Nonetheless, despite these improvements, and contrary to the conspicuous displays of wealth from Thailand's emergent urban middle class, there is also in Chiang Mai clear evidence of the ongoing exclusion, poverty, and inequality that continue to characterize parts of Thai society. For this reason, there is ongoing demand in Thailand for the services provided by NGOs, and this demand, coupled with the desire among foreign tourists to spend time in this region of Thailand, has created many opportunities in Chiang Mai for those interested in participating in short-term volunteering projects.

The majority of short-term volunteers in Chiang Mai pay volunteer 'ground operators' to handle the logistics of a volunteer's trip, including visa advice, accommodation, meals, airport transfer, and cultural and language training once the volunteer has arrived in Thailand. The majority of the eight ground operators found in the province of Chiang Mai are commercial enterprises that work directly with a wide variety of local entities, including NGOs, Buddhist temples, public schools, medical facilities, commercial businesses, and social welfare institutions such as orphanages, children's homes, homes for the disabled, shelters for abused women, and other such institutions offering social services to disadvantaged groups. Most volunteers handled by ground operators in Chiang Mai would be considered short-term volunteers, defined in much of the literature on international voluntary service as those who volunteer for a period of eight weeks or less (Lough *et al.*, 2011). This paper focuses on those volunteers that come to Chiang Mai through ground operators rather than self-placing directly with host organizations and institutions. Though some of the volunteers encountered during this research had participated in service for longer than eight weeks, only one had stayed longer than 12 weeks (the typical duration of a single-entry Thai non-immigrant visa is 12 weeks). Unlike NGOs in many other low- and middle-income countries that depend on the donations of short-term volunteers, the NGOs in Chiang Mai that host volunteers placed by ground operators derive benefits mostly from the time and labor contributed by volunteers, rather than direct monetary contributions, which are not only very small but also are provided by only three of the seven ground operators assessed for this research.

Some volunteers, journalists, and scholars would consider volunteer tourist a pejorative label, but the term is deliberately used throughout this paper because it effectively captures the dualistic nature of the experiences of most short-term volunteers in Thailand. In order to assess the importance of development-related themes to short-term volunteers, the author conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 55 volunteers and 15 directors, managers, and staff members from seven of Chiang Mai's eight volunteer ground operators. For the sake of anonymity, the names of all volunteers mentioned in this paper were changed. Interviews took place in a variety of locations such as coffee shops, restaurants, the offices of the volunteer ground operators, or on site in locations (such as schools or temples) where volunteers participated in service activities. Interviews with volunteers explored several themes, including their reasons for volunteering, reflections on the benefits and limitations of their volunteer experiences, and their perceptions of the value of volunteer tourism in Thailand specifically. Similarly, interviews with ground operator managers and staff centered on the role played by short-term voluntary service in the well-being of local communities, the relationship between volunteer tourism and other kinds of tourism in Thailand, and the lessons learned from working with international volunteers. Due to their experience working with a large number of volunteers over the course of several years, managers provided particular insights on the questions being asked in this research, and also allowed the author to compare the views of volunteers with the views of those facilitating the experience.

The author also engaged in participant observation in the locations where service activities took place. Visits to volunteering sites proved important in establishing the physical and social context in which volunteer tourism takes place, and allowed the author to witness firsthand the nature of interaction between volunteers and locals. The printed and online marketing materials of volunteer organizations were also studied in order to identify the ways in which common textual and visual tropes in the marketing materials compared to or reflected the views of volunteers and the managers and staff of ground operators. It should be noted that this research focuses only on those volunteers that come to

Thailand through a ground operator, and thereby excludes those volunteers that arrive independently and make their own arrangements with host institutions. Although it would certainly be interesting to study this latter group of volunteers, the number of independent volunteers is small compared to the number that go through a ground operator. Moreover, volunteer tourists that work with a ground operator share a similar experience compared to independent volunteers, and therefore enable a more fruitful analysis of common themes.

## The importance of development to short-term volunteers in northern Thailand

Despite the strong emphasis on development found in much of the literature on volunteer tourism, and the frequent allusions to development reproduced in the marketing materials of volunteer organizations, research revealed a surprisingly limited degree of interest, concern, and knowledge regarding the implications, meanings, complexities, and controversies associated with development. Even if one accepts a broad range of definitions of development, including traditional approaches linked to productivity, growth, and broad social transformation, as well as more modest objectives such as making a difference and giving back to others, it is clear based on this research that while development certainly plays a part in shaping the actions of some volunteers, it represents just one of many forces motivating individuals to participate in voluntary service in northern Thailand.

When asked whether they hoped to improve or contribute to the wellbeing of individuals and communities in Thailand, volunteers would always answer in the affirmative, as one would expect. On the contrary, when asked more open-ended questions regarding reasons they chose to visit Thailand as short-term volunteers, fewer than half of all respondents explicitly mentioned development-related motives such as the desire to help or make a difference. By contrast, virtually every volunteer highlighted motivations associated with more conventional tourist desires and objectives such as novelty, adventure, and especially authenticity. For McKenna, a recent university graduate from California, volunteering provided a glimpse of life into another culture, as well as a more authentic way of living:

*I really wanted exposure to something not the United States. I wanted to know what it was like to live somewhere like this. I love living in the village. I helped my family harvest rice and they did it all by hand and it was the most grueling work I've ever done in my life. But the rice we eat everyday is rice that they've harvested from their fields that they've grown and the pork we eat is from pigs that they kill. It's just very much closer to real life. You see how you're living a lot more.*

Concerns about safety and a desire to spend a long stretch of time in Thailand in an organized, structured fashion also motivated many volunteers, especially young women. Reflecting on her reasons for volunteering rather than travelling, Priscilla from Denmark stated,

*I chose to do a volunteering project because I didn't want to travel by myself. I thought that this would be an opportunity to travel, but I would have a program that I would be going into, you know, so I wouldn't have to plan everything on my own, and I would meet other people. I think that was the main reason for me to do this.*

As many studies of volunteer tourism illustrate (Broad, 2003; Daldeniz & Hampton, 2011), volunteers often participate in service in order to gain career skills. This is also the case with short-term volunteers in Thailand, including Angelo, a gap year student from Ireland who was motivated by a desire for authenticity as well as the career benefits associated with teaching as a volunteer:

*It just seemed like a really nice way to experience a different culture. Like actually meeting the people a bit more than just meeting them at market stores and that sort of thing. It seemed like a really nice idea in that way. And also it was to give me a taste of teaching, without having to go into a placement for a certain amount of time. It's only six weeks so if I don't like it then I can just push through.*

Thus, although a desire to care for others, feel useful, and participate in something perceived as beneficial to others (as well as oneself) were reported by some respondents as motivations, volunteers more often displayed an interest in objectives that are not only unrelated to development, but framed in the context of efforts to maintain spatial and discursive distance from mass tourists. Moreover, outside settings such as group orientation meetings, where peer pressure to perform sensitivity and reflexivity are strong, volunteers only occasionally reflected on the development implications of their experiences, unless prompted or steered in that direction by specific interview questions. This may be due to the successful management of volunteer expectations on the part of volunteer ground operators. For example, at every single orientation meeting attended by the author, the managers and staff members of ground operators made great efforts to communicate to volunteers the importance of having realistic expectations about the impacts of their short-term voluntary service.

Just as development as a guiding motif is among a multitude of reasons for, rather than the primary driving force behind, volunteering in northern Thailand, the achievement of developmental objectives, including making a positive difference in another person's life, factored only moderately in volunteer reflections on what made their experiences enjoyable and rewarding. This is not to say that the service activities undertaken by volunteers were unimportant: in a handful of cases, when volunteers perceived their service to be redundant or underutilized, complaints were strongly voiced and the focus of the conversation quickly turned to issues such as the role and impact of volunteering on local welfare and development. Such complaints mirror the findings of other studies, such as Vodopivec and Jaffe (2011), and Zavitz and Butz (2011), that point out the frustration and disillusionment that sets in for volunteers (and for researchers assuming a volunteering role) when projects are poorly conceived or managed. However, aside from these rare cases when projects were perceived as being disorganized or unnecessary to the recipients of the voluntary service, all but a handful of volunteers believed that even if it could somehow be demonstrated that the impact of their service was neutral or minimal, it would still be worth volunteering. Madison from Canada, for example, stated that even in the absence of significant or obvious benefits for locals, volunteering would nonetheless remain a valuable experience because,

*For me personally, I think it would be [worth it] because it didn't, or won't hurt them. It might expose them to a bit more culture, and that's a positive. And then also for the volunteers seeing, just meeting new people, getting out of your comfort zone, doing something completely different. I think that's an absolute positive.*

As illustrated in the quotation above, many respondents assess the success of their volunteering through the principle of 'do no harm,' though many volunteers also stated a hope that their service had more



than just a neutral or paltry impact. Volunteers nevertheless acknowledge, but do not seem overly concerned, that since most voluntary service in northern Thailand centers on interpersonal interactions with locals and not the production of a tangible material product or outcome, it is almost impossible to measure whether their individual, or even collective, efforts are indeed making a difference over the long term. The fact that few volunteers are troubled by their inability to know for sure whether their service contributed to development, however defined, indicates that the promotion of development is at best only a moderate determinant of satisfaction among short-term volunteers in northern Thailand. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to include a full discussion of managerial and organizational views on development, it is important to note that organizations that facilitate short-term voluntary service emphasize, understand, and reflect upon development to a much greater degree than the volunteers themselves, and are very concerned about whether their volunteers are contributing to the development efforts of the NGOs and schools with which they work. Though they recognize that development is a loaded and contested term, and that volunteers likely contribute to development in only incremental ways, managers and directors of organizations firmly assert that they are using volunteer tourism as a development strategy, and believe that short-term volunteers enhance the effectiveness of institutions attempting to promote community development.

One reason that development does not play a prominent role in determining volunteers' perceptions of success or satisfaction is that volunteers possess modest expectations regarding their ability to engender substantial changes in the lives of locals. Contrary to those who accuse volunteer tourists of arrogantly believing, in neocolonial fashion, that they represent primary agents of development or solutions to the complex structural problems facing poor countries, volunteer tourists in northern Thailand see themselves simply as individuals engaged in community service that is designed to provide an immediate benefit to another person. It is also worth noting that the services provided by volunteers in northern Thailand, most especially English-language instruction, are not simply supplied by volunteer tourism organizations hoping to profit from fabricated projects, but reflect real demand among locals for such services. While it is true that the collective efforts of all volunteers teaching English in a particular school or temple may in some case contribute to the improvement of economic prospects for certain students, most volunteers recognize that their contribution to solving the long-term structural constraints facing their Thai hosts is minimal at best.

The notion that volunteers travel to the global South in a quixotic, neocolonial quest to save or change the world was almost completely absent in the narratives of volunteers interviewed for this research. Further, several volunteers admitted that if they truly cared about contributing to deep and lasting change, they would donate money directly to institutions, pursue careers in development or social work, or commit to staying in Thailand for many years rather than spending money on short-term volunteer vacations. Critics of volunteer tourism correctly point out that a lack of training, skills, language, and cultural familiarity make it highly difficult for volunteer tourists to make significant contributions to development, but in the case of northern Thailand, volunteers agree with this assertion, pointing out in several cases that teaching and performing community service on a largely part-time basis is unlikely to produce transformative change. This modesty and lack of idealistically grand ambitions on the part of volunteers is coupled with a recognition that volunteers have much to learn from Thais, and not just the other way around. As Talia, a 23 year old from the United States, noted:

*I don't believe that someone can come from a Western culture, especially America and go into an area and be like 'ah, this is a silly tradition! I don't know anything about your community, but this is how we should do things so obviously that's the right way!' There's no way that you can go somewhere and know the solutions. Like, I always sort of put myself in a subjective position here to learn from other people. I came here with the intention of learning, so I would always put myself in the subordinate role when I was going to do service because I can't go into a community and know what the right solution is.*

One final indication that development does not represent a dominant force in the expectations, desires, and actions of volunteers is the rarity with which Thailand is depicted as a country in desperate need of external assistance. Although some volunteers mentioned in interviews that their community service serves as an immediate response to the social welfare needs of particular groups, including disabled children or members of marginalized ethnic minority communities, virtually nobody stated that they chose to volunteer in Thailand because of a dire need for, or absence of, development. Of course, compared to the individuals with whom they interact during their service, volunteers are relatively much wealthier, but due to the nature of the community service performed by most volunteers – which involves in the majority of cases teaching in elementary schools and Buddhist temples, participating in conservation efforts, and volunteering at medical clinics – the degree of poverty encountered by volunteers is far less blatant and shocking than the destitution visible to short-term volunteers in other, much poorer volunteer tourism destinations. As a middle-income country with a burgeoning middle class and popular tourism industry, Thailand does not tend to attract those volunteers driven by an intense desire to witness, experience, and ameliorate chronic poverty. While volunteers rightly acknowledged in interviews that Thailand still possesses pockets of poverty and marginalization, it was only occasionally described as a 'Third World' country. Additionally, though many volunteers expressed nostalgic concerns about the pace and degree of economic and social change in Thailand, some like Sarah from England indicated that despite not initially expecting such a high level of urbanization and development in Thailand, it was heartening rather than disappointing:

*Thinking about coming to Thailand, even telling my family and my co-workers and friends and stuff like that, they're like, 'Thailand, why Thailand?' And everyone thinks 'oh my God,' you know, like they were scared about what's going to happen. You'd think 'oh my God,' because you don't know what to expect, but you come here, and it's not that bad. It's very touristy and you kind of feel right at home you know. Back then, it was developing, but I think it became very touristy. I think that I was actually happy that it's not as bad as I thought it was. I'm really glad it improved so much. And I don't know, I think it's a very good thing because it's hard for a whole country to develop into something stable and well governed.*

## Volunteer conceptualizations of development, poverty, and ethical consumption

Regarding the ways in which short-term volunteers define or approach development, responses cluster around three groups. First, a very small number of respondents, numbering less than five, had studied development or affiliated disciplines in university and were somewhat prepared to discuss the meaning and implications of various approaches to development. The second group, which is larger but

still represents fewer than half of volunteers, define development loosely and broadly, as micro-scale improvements in people's wellbeing. Many volunteers in this group, as well as the first group, use the term *community* development to delineate the scale and target of their efforts, and confirmed in conversations that they believed that they were indeed participating in development work, albeit in a limited way that has more to do with performing community service and social work than tackling complex macro-scale problems such as insufficient infrastructure, underemployment, debt, bad governance, or weak social and economic institutions. The third, and largest, group consists of volunteers that, when asked, had no idea what development means, and therefore were unable to determine whether their community service constituted development work. As a result, this group required significant guidance from the author when asked questions about development in interviews. The following interaction with Delaney, a nursing student from New Zealand, is emblematic of conversations with this third group of volunteers:

Author: *Do you think Thailand is on the right path in terms of development?*

Delaney: *I'm not too sure to be honest. I don't really know. I don't really think about things like that.*

Author: *Ok, well with the volunteering, do you think that it is development work?*

Delaney: *Do you mean like, in what way, sorry?*

Author: *Would you classify the stuff that you guys are doing, the volunteers are doing, as development work?*

Delaney: *What do you mean by development work?*

Author: *Whatever it means to you, because there are different definitions, right?*

Delaney: (Long pause) *I don't really know what development work is, sorry, so I find it hard to answer if I know what that is.*

The view that volunteer tourism is a neocolonial endeavor steeped in the discourse of salvation and development may be inaccurate in the case of northern Thailand, but the argument that it promotes a neoliberal agenda is closer to the mark. At a general level, it is true that volunteer tourism in Thailand, as elsewhere, signifies the neoliberal paradigm in which the state retreats from its function as a provider of social services, and in which questions of poverty and inequality are reframed as individual challenges rather than problems that should be addressed through collective political action, including at the state level. The neoliberal perspective therefore, according to several scholars (Conran, 2011; Vodopivec & Jaffe, 2011), encourages an apolitical approach to problems that are, in fact, fundamentally rooted in policy decisions and best solved through political action. With the exception of several middle-aged and elderly volunteers, who did reveal knowledge and concern about the politics roots of poverty and structural inequality, the majority of volunteers interviewed for this study demonstrated little awareness of, or even curiosity about, the underlying causes of marginalization, and often attributed their relative privilege not to historical and political global relationships, but to sheer luck. As Simpson (2005) points out, volunteer tourists often attribute differences in material wealth more to a deterministic 'luck of the draw' than to the structural conditions that shape global inequality, and this was also the case with many of the volunteer tourists interviewed for this research.

Because of their mostly apolitical and superficial understanding of individual and community struggles, volunteers tend to characterize poverty as an authentic, unavoidable, and even acceptable part of Thai culture and society. This echoes the findings of research conducted by Mostafanezhad (2013b) on volunteer tourists in northern Thailand. In particular, she points out that at least three-quarters of respondents portrayed the poverty of community members as authentic and cultural. Consequently, and as part of an effort to perhaps avoid sounding judgmental and ethnocentric, volunteers interviewed for this research often describe the locals with whom they interacted as 'poor but happy.' This theme emerged in many interviews, as illustrated by the following statements:

*It's just a completely different culture. People's aspirations are completely different in what they want from life. I think just generally, I think the lifestyle here just seems very simple, but in a humble way. Like it's not sad or depressing, it's just, everyone's kind of happy with what they have. (McKenzie, Australia)*

*Here, when you see the Thais say thank you – some of them have like nothing or like only a few things, but they are still so happy and enjoy their lives. In Germany, it's like oh my God I can't buy this car, which makes me so unhappy. Sometimes I think German people should be more... they should also be happy if they don't have so many things. (Ben, Germany)*

*In the West, everybody is so obsessed with money, like making money, even more money than they need, whereas in Thailand, I think people don't sit around and watch TV all night long. I think they respect, they have better relationships, I'm just guessing, with their friends and family. Back home, people are very individual and we get on that rat race where you just work, work, work until you're 65 and you know, buy a bigger house, buy a bigger car. Here, I think people seem pretty much happy with what they have, even if by Western standards, it doesn't really look like much. (Sharon, United States)*

Critics of volunteer tourism could perhaps argue that the volunteers interviewed for this research employ romantic and apolitical conceptions of poverty in order to avoid the anxiety, guilt, and call to action produced by a deeper engagement with poverty and social justice (Simpson, 2004). This may be true, but at the same time, despite not seeing themselves as typical tourists (Mostafanezhad, 2013c), short-term volunteers in northern Thailand are clearly more aligned in motivation, interests, and behavior with alternative tourism, rather than development work, so expecting them to confront poverty in a politically informed and engaged manner is overly optimistic in light of how rare it is for any Western tourist, alternative or otherwise, to willingly embrace moments of deep anxiety and discomfort, and then use these moments as a springboard to become committed, effective agents of change and social justice in another country.

It would also, at first glance, appear as if volunteers in northern Thailand substitute ethical consumer choices, such as volunteer tourism, for traditional politics and transformative visions of modernization and development (Butcher, 2011). However, this too is only partly accurate in this case. It is true that those volunteers interested in the humanitarian impacts of their experience usually limit their ambitions to simply making a difference, rather than wanting to play a role in the broad economic and social transformation of Thai society. But this is not because volunteers explicitly reject some traditional vision of development, or because acts of charity are seen as sufficient responses to poverty, inequality, and other development challenges. Rather, it is because volunteers on the whole feel that all they are ill equipped to participate in large-scale development efforts. As they themselves acknowledge, volunteers

lack the language skills, training, pre-existing interest, and future commitment to participate in anything other than small-scale, person-to-person voluntary service. It is for this reason that volunteers are able to treat only the symptoms, and not the causes, of underdevelopment (Conran, 2011). One could argue that even if they are not recognized or consciously admitted, hegemonic cultural practices and discourses, including those related to development, nevertheless remain influential in the opinions of volunteers. Nevertheless, it is significant that only a minority of volunteers talk explicitly about development or consider themselves agents of development. Hence, it is difficult to argue that volunteer tourists as a group are rejecting, condoning, or extending any particular ideology related to development. Ultimately, some volunteers might be motivated by a desire to change the world through ethical consumer decisions, but even more important in the case of volunteers in northern Thailand is the desire to make consumer choices that distinguish oneself as a different kind of *tourist*. Thus, while participating in volunteer tourism may at a broad level resemble other apolitical and guilt-free ethical consumer acts aimed at making the world a better place, volunteer tourism in northern Thailand should be seen first and foremost as a reaction against mass tourism and not just as the "degradation of the discourse of development" (Butcher & Smith, 2010, p. 34).

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that the role played by development in the motivations and activities of short-term volunteers in northern Thailand is less significant than one would predict based on both the heavy emphasis on development found in the literature on volunteer tourism, and the frequent allusions to development evident in the marketing of many volunteer sending organizations. In arguing that themes such as caring for others, making a difference, or contributing to positive social change are relevant, but not dominant, motivations for short-term volunteers in northern Thailand, this paper confirms the findings of several studies which point out that volunteers are principally driven by such motivations as the acquisition of career skills (Daldeniz & Hampton, 2011), a wish to visit a destination perceived as exotic (Sin, 2009), and a desire for intimate encounters with hosts (Conran, 2011). This paper has also demonstrated that despite the genuine belief among managers and directors of volunteer tourism ground operators in Chiang Mai that short-term voluntary service can play a part, albeit a small one, in community development, it is questionable whether volunteers with no Thai language skills, and little background, training, or even interest in development, can contribute in any substantial way to overcoming the complex structural problems facing countries such as Thailand.

It would be easy for critics of short-term voluntary service to see this study as yet another example of volunteer tourism's failure to live up to its promise as a development strategy or instrument of poverty alleviation, social justice, and more equitable North-South relations. Similarly, some could interpret the arguments put forth in this paper as evidence that egoistic volunteer tourists care more about their own satisfaction than they do about the development outcomes of host communities. However, aside from unfairly dismissing the time and effort contributed by volunteers to community service, such criticisms would reveal the unrealistic expectation that short-term volunteers should carry the weight of the world's development problems on their shoulders. Palacios (2010) makes a similar point when he argues that international volunteering programs organized by universities should stop employing a discourse of development aid since this leads to unrealistic expectations and eventually frustration among volunteers.

If anything, it is actually reassuring that the majority of volunteers interviewed for this research do not consider themselves development workers, do not claim to be changing the world or lifting people out of poverty, and do not generally betray the attitude that Western volunteers represent the solution to the problems of 'Third World' countries. While it is reasonable to criticize volunteers, and all citizens of wealthy countries, for abandoning political solutions to global development problems, as well as for caring insufficiently about structural and historical inequality generally, volunteer tourists should be applauded for their modest ambitions because believing that they could actually change the world through short-term voluntary vacations would indeed be patronizing, arrogant, and neocolonial. It also bears mentioning that even though short-term voluntary trips form a growing segment of alternative tourism, they account for only a fraction of the overall tourism market in Thailand. Every year, there are approximately one hundred thousand international volunteers in the entire northern region of Thailand, but the province of Chiang Mai alone received 1.9 million foreign tourists in 2011 (TAT, 2014). (The number of international volunteers is an estimate based on research currently being conducted by faculty members at Far Eastern University in Chiang Mai. Preliminary results of this research were reported at a conference on volunteer tourism in northern Thailand held on January 23, 2013 in Chiang Mai.) As a group representing, at most, five percent of all tourists in northern Thailand, short-term international volunteers play a very small role in overall national and regional development compared to both the tourism industry as a whole, and to the larger economic, political, social forces acting upon the lives of individuals in Thailand.

Due to the ambiguity surrounding the meaning of development, the difficulty of accurately measuring whether or to what degree volunteers actually do make a difference, the relatively moderate importance of development to the motivations and experiences of volunteers, and the inflated and largely unattainable expectations that are created when calling volunteer tourism a development strategy, it is clear that development may not be the best, or at least only, lens through which to assess volunteer tourism in middle-income destinations such as Thailand. As hinted throughout this paper, international community service offers an alternative and more appropriate framework for understanding volunteer tourism in the case of northern Thailand. The use of international community service, as opposed to development, as a central principle of short-term voluntary service is rare in the literature on volunteer tourism. Outside the field of tourism studies, however, several authors (Lough, 2013; Lough *et al.*, 2011; McBride, Benítez & Sherraden, 2003) have characterized international voluntary service as social work or civic service rather than development. Volunteers almost universally describe their activities in terms pertinent to community service, but only a minority places them in the context of development. Community service is also an accurate description of virtually all activities undertaken by volunteers, whereas calling these activities examples of development work would be a stretch in most cases. Further, just because this community service takes place in a developing country does not necessarily make it development work; if tutoring children, visiting homes for the disabled, planting trees, and volunteering in health clinics is considered community service when performed in Europe and North America, there is no reason that these activities should not be similarly defined in Thailand. Volunteer tourists derive the same benefits as those performing community service at home: the emotional satisfaction that comes from showing (and being shown) love and affection, the approval and praise that comes from doing something perceived as useful and valuable, and the opportunity to step outside of one's comfort zone.

To conclude, it is important that incorrect inferences are not drawn from this study. In particular, even though volunteers participate in community service in Thailand mostly as a way of facilitating intimate, authentic, and rewarding interactions with host communities, it does not mean that community service is entirely divorced from the development efforts of institutions and volunteer ground operators. Neither does it imply that the efforts of volunteers are futile or worthy of derision, because aside from contributing labor to social welfare institutions, volunteers demonstrate concern for, and provide social services to, individuals often marginalized and ostracized in Thai society. Though its connection to short-term volunteering is less important than assumed by many advocates and critics of volunteer tourism, development nevertheless remains a relevant framework and deserves continued attention, even in destinations where volunteers are primarily drawn by touristic objectives such as novelty, adventure, and authenticity. It would also be incorrect to conclude that volunteers in northern Thailand are unconcerned about the impacts of their service on locals. Like the ground operators that place them with local institutions and NGOs, volunteers do care about the wellbeing of host communities and are genuinely hopeful that they can make a positive contribution to the lives of others. In short, development may not be the dominant driving force behind volunteer tourism in northern Thailand, but this should not automatically lead to the conclusion that short-term international voluntary service is therefore inherently narcissistic, hypocritical, or exploitative.

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