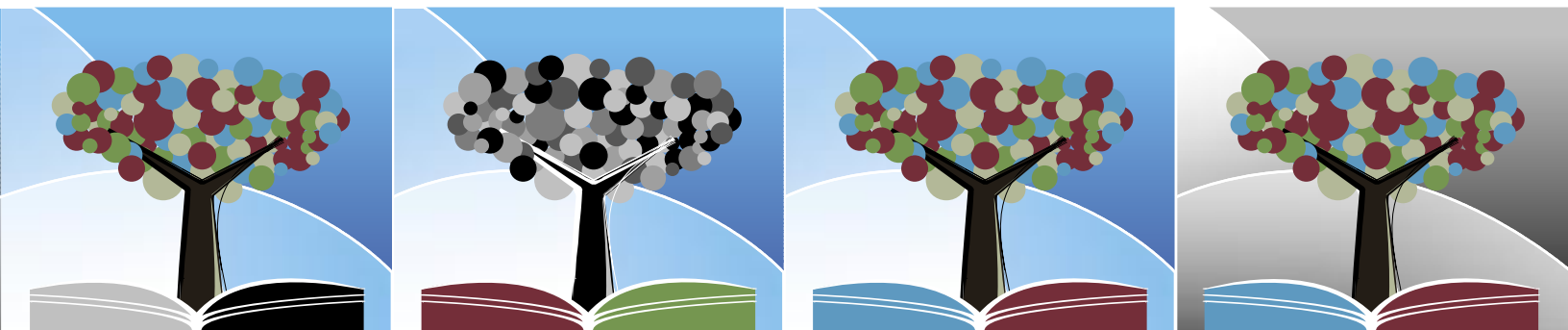


K N O W L E D G E D E V E L O P M E N T C E N T R E



The Overseas Experience: A Passport to Improved Volunteerism A Research Report

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The logo for Canada, featuring the word "Canada" in a serif font with a small Canadian flag icon above the letter "a".

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The Overseas Experience: A Passport to Improved Volunteerism

Introduction

Canadians have a long history of volunteering beyond their borders. Since the early 1960s, tens of thousands of Canadian volunteers have packed their suitcases and taken their skills overseas. These individuals have contributed to community and human development, broadened their worldview, and deepened cultural connections with the global community.

A volunteer placement in the developing world can be profoundly affecting and life-changing. The aim of our research was to explore the volunteering patterns of these Canadians once they return home. Does the overseas experience spark the volunteer spirit or was it there before they journeyed abroad? Do these volunteers continue to contribute their time to global issues after they return to Canada or do they re-focus on local concerns? Do they volunteer more, having been bitten by the “volunteer bug” or do they volunteer less, having “paid their dues” overseas? These were the guiding questions of our research.

Canadian volunteers abroad: A brief history

International volunteerism has its roots in Europe in the 1950s when colonial powers began sending volunteers overseas to assist in the development of colonies and newly independent countries. The British organization Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), for example, was created in 1957.

The tradition of sending Canadian volunteers to the developing world formally began in 1960 with the creation of Canadian Volunteers Overseas at the University of Toronto. The new movement spread quickly to other universities and, in June of 1961, Canadian University Services Overseas (CUSO) was established as a nonprofit organization (CUSO, 2006).

In August 1961, the first group of five volunteers left for a year’s service in India, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), and Sarawak. They were followed in 1962 by 16 more volunteers. Most worked as teachers. Their motto was “serve and learn,” and their aim was to help newly independent nations move towards self-sufficiency while increasing their own awareness of the developing world.

At first, CUSO was privately funded, but since 1965 the organization has received federal government funding. Since its inception, CUSO (which no longer

stands for Canadian University Services Overseas) has sent approximately 11,000 Canadians abroad. At any time, approximately 200 Canadians are volunteering through CUSO in Africa, Asia, the Pacific, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

Although CUSO is the oldest and one of the largest Canadian agencies sending volunteers abroad, it is not the only one. In 1971, Senator Jacques Hébert founded Canada World Youth to offer young people their first opportunity to volunteer overseas and live in a new culture. Since then, more than 22,000 youth have participated in this program.

There are now over a dozen Canadian nonprofit organizations sending volunteers abroad. Since 1960, an estimated 65,000 Canadians have volunteered overseas (see Table 1).¹ These nonprofit organizations send Canadians abroad for both development and cross-cultural purposes.

Volunteer placements vary from two weeks (CESO), to four months (CCI), to several years (CUSO and WUSC). The volunteers represent a broad cross-section of Canadian society and are drawn from all regions of the country.²

The approach taken by these organizations has evolved from providing charity to working in cooperation. Most of them focus their programs on specific countries or sectors and seek to enhance local capacity in community development, health, or education. Most work with local partners to ensure that skills are transferred to people in the host community.³ Many organizations that send volunteers overseas are also involved in public education on global issues within Canada.

Although all of these organizations use the term volunteer, not all Canadians who venture overseas are, strictly speaking, volunteers. Most are paid a

Table 1: Number of volunteers sent overseas since 1960 by organization

Organization	Number of volunteers
Canada World Youth (CWY)	22,000
CUSO	11,000
Canadian Executive Service Organization (CESO)	8,400
Canadian Crossroads International (CCI)	5,500
Canadian Centre for International Studies and Cooperation (CECI)	3,500
World University Service of Canada (WUSC)	3,000
SUCO	2,500
Oxfam-Québec	2,300
Total	58,200

¹ This estimate is from the Canadian International Volunteer Coalition (2001). In addition to the organizations listed in Table 1, some smaller nonprofit organizations occasionally send volunteers overseas through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).

² Because some organizations have been in existence for a long time, they have sent volunteers in terms of age, ethnic origin, and expertise.

³ Groups like Canada World Youth are different; their mandates stress youth service and cultural exchange.

stipend that is more or less equal to a local living wage. These organizations, including CUSO, do not expect participants to bankroll their postings. However, several organizations do ask applicants to help fundraise for the overseas experience and so offer a country-specific salary. Because of this, some participants consider the posting a job, albeit a very low-paying one. In fact, some who leave for the developing world fresh out of university may view it as their first real job. Most participants, however, leave their Canadian jobs (and their Canadian wages) for the duration of the overseas postings. Because these individuals do not go overseas with the goal of making money, we regarded them as volunteers for the purpose of this study.

Whether they are volunteers or development workers, Canadians who are sent to the developing world have become an important component of our country's foreign aid programs and contribute to our image as a country that provides assistance where needed. A 2003 survey by Environics Research Group (2004) found that 78% of Canadians support our country's development aid program, which includes sending volunteers abroad.⁴

The need for research

Most agencies that send volunteers abroad evaluate their impact on the recipient country. These assessments are crucial for designing and implementing overseas placements and for justifying the expense and effort of sending Canadians abroad. But there have been few studies that look at Canadian global volunteers and the impact they have on Canadian communities once they are back in Canada.

In 2001, the 14-member Canadian International Volunteer Coalition (CIVC) organized a national consultation on the value and future of Canadian international volunteering.⁵ Approximately 500 people participated, including former international volunteers; staff and volunteers of organizations with international volunteer programs; representatives of domestic volunteer organizations; and people who work in international cooperation. Although the consultations focused primarily on the role of Canadians sharing professional skills and knowledge abroad, volunteer activities such as public education in Canada and building linkages between groups in the north and the south were explored. In the final report, *International Volunteering: Looking Ahead*, Proudfoot (2001) states:

There is increased recognition of the role that [returned] volunteers play in promoting global awareness and citizenship both in the communities where they volunteer and back in their home country – building bridges between citizens around the world (p. 4).

⁴ These findings are consistent with Thérien, & Dallaire, 2003).

⁵ CIVC members were the Aga Khan Foundation Canada, Canada World Youth, CANADEM, Canadian d'étude et de coopération internationale (CECI), Canadian Crossroads International, Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Canadian Executive Service Organization (CESO), CUSO, Doctors Without Borders/ Médecins sans Frontières (MSF), Paul Gérin-Lajoie Foundation, Oxfam-Québec, SUCO, Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) Canada, and World University Service of Canada (WUSC).

The CIVC consultations did not explore in any depth the unique perspectives and potential of Canadians who have already volunteered abroad and what these volunteers bring back to Canada. The report asserts that “former international volunteers often continue to be very active on global and local community development issues throughout their lives, in volunteer and paid capacities” (Proudfoot, 2001, p.4). However, this assertion appears to be based on anecdotal evidence and “gut feelings.” No numbers are given.

The Canadian Council for International Cooperation (CCIC), a coalition of Canadian nonprofit organizations involved in international development and poverty alleviation, released a report entitled *New Horizons: Engaging Canadians as Active Global Citizens* (O’Neill, 2004). It stresses the importance of a citizenry active in the global village because Canada is a profoundly multicultural country.

The world very literally is in Canada by virtue of the diversity of our founders (French, English and First Nations), the successive waves of immigrants who have challenged and reshaped our self-image over the last century, and the choices we have made to enshrine bilingualism and multiculturalism in official policy (O’Neill, 2004, p. 1).

The report also highlights how youth are increasingly international in their outlook and proud of Canada’s cultural diversity. It underscores the need for Canadians to have personal channels for international links and advocates for enhanced public engagement

on global issues at home. It also notes the importance of organizations like Canadian Crossroads International, CUSO, World University Service of Canada, Voluntary Service Overseas Canada, and the Quebec-based Centre canadien d’étude et de coopération internationale that “provide a direct outlet for Canadian involvement as cooperants⁶ who volunteer their time and talents to development initiatives (O’Neill, 2004, p. 5).

In 2005, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) commissioned research on international volunteers (Universalis, E.T. Jackson & Associates, & Salasan, 2005). The researchers surveyed returned volunteers who served between 1994 and 2004 with Canadian Crossroads International, Canada World Youth, VSO Canada, and World University Service of Canada. The objective was to understand how the overseas volunteer experience affects the motivations of returned volunteers, their capabilities, and their performance as volunteers. They gathered their information through an online survey that was answered by 549 returned volunteers and through interviews with 53 volunteers.

The findings affirm that the overseas experience had a profound impact on the values of beliefs of returned volunteers, as well as on

their skill levels, the career and education decisions they have made on their return, and their involvement and support to local community or international development. [Their involvement in] public engagement work is having positive effects on Canadians’ understanding of, and openness

⁶ Several differentiate the required skills and experience for these overseas postings from more general volunteer positions that may not require specific expertise.

to, different cultures as well as their knowledge of development issues, leading to increased involvement in international development and support to development programs (Universalialia et al., 2005, p. iii).

In particular, the report cites the public engagement activities of returned volunteers at the local level.

[These efforts] give Canadians an up-close encounter with other cultures and world perspectives without ever leaving their homes, schools, workplaces or communities.... Community members were often quite moved to hear of the issues facing people in developing countries, which they had not been aware of, but some were also quick to identify with the similarities in 'struggling to make ends meet and support their family too.' As such, returned volunteers provided a 'human face' for people in developing countries... and created an attitude of openness toward fellow Canadians from a different background (Universalialia et al., 2005, p. 37).

The key findings of this research are summarized below.

1. Returned volunteers (RVs) believe that their overseas experience had an impact on their beliefs and values.

Survey respondents said that their values, beliefs, and attitudes had changed to a great extent in several areas: international development issues (78%), people of a different background (70%),

international politics (67%), and community development (63%).

It seems returned volunteers have a more critical approach to international issues and an increased sense of responsibility stemming from their better understanding of Canada's impact and role in the world. This overseas experience creates a greater feeling of connection to the world and a desire to take action.

Many RVs spoke of the power Canada has to make a difference in the world, and how the sending of volunteers goes a long way in breaking down some of the walls that exist between 'us' and 'them,' and fostering a new sense of solidarity between Canadians and their overseas counterparts (Universalialia et al., 2005, p. 43).

2. The majority of returned volunteers report that volunteering overseas helped develop their skills in a variety of ways.

Survey respondents said that their overseas experience affected the skills, knowledge, and abilities they use in their personal life, work, community, and education. More than half (58%) said that it affected the skills they use in their personal life to a great extent. Forty percent (40%) said that it affected the skills they use in work, community, and education to a great extent.

Volunteers explained that their people skills had improved in terms of listening, cross-cultural communication, and conflict resolution. Overseas placements also challenged their values and perspectives on doing things.

They found, however, that their skills were more suited to a Canadian context and they had to learn to improvise and be creative in the application of their knowledge overseas. As a result, RVs noted that the professional skills they already possessed were enhanced by their experiences overseas (Universalia et al., 2005, p. 43).

welcome committees, local advocacy groups, Amnesty International, etc.) or both. A significant number of RVs had a history of volunteerism in their communities and their experience overseas simply solidified their commitment to volunteerism (Universalia et al., 2005, p. 45).

3. Overseas volunteer experience influences career and education decisions.

Many volunteers returned to Canada to study development-related topics, while others shifted career paths to stay involved in the nonprofit or public sectors. Forty-six percent (46%) of returned volunteers said their career decisions had been affected to a great extent by their overseas experience. Forty percent (40%) said that their career decisions had been somewhat affected. Only 4% said there was no affect at all. Similar results were found for the impact on volunteers' decisions about education.

Universalia et al. (2005) concluded that the overseas experience leaves a deep and long-lasting impression on individual volunteers.

This effect lasts for the rest of their lives; in fact some of the volunteers interviewed actually referred to their experience overseas as the watershed moment in their lives (p. 45).

This report provides valuable information on returned volunteers, but it does not assess how much volunteering they actually do once they are back home. Nor does it explore the types of volunteer activity they are engaged compared to that of the average Canadian.

4. Many returned volunteers continue to be active in community or international development through work, volunteerism, or donations.

Sixty percent (60%) of survey respondents reported that they were still involved in development issues through community or service groups. Half (52%) were still involved in development through their career. Only 18% reported no involvement with development issues.

The ongoing volunteer patterns of returned Canadian volunteers have not been sufficiently studied and are therefore the focus of this research project. The information presented in this report contributes to an evaluation of the lasting benefits of these volunteers to both Canada and the developing world.

The majority of RVs spoke of their continued involvement in community development or international development issues. They have either pursued a career in development or volunteer with community groups (e.g., immigrant

Research methodology

We set out to discover if Canadians who have served abroad continue to volunteer on their return to Canada; why they do or do not volunteer; what they volunteer for; and what influence, if any, the overseas experience has had on their volunteer and charitable activity once they are back home.

To answer these questions, we conducted a survey of 647 returned volunteers and in-depth interviews with 40 survey respondents who were currently active as volunteers in Canada. We also compared some of our survey results to the results of the 2004 Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating.

Survey of returned volunteers

We selected our survey sample of 1,150 people from CUSO's database of the 11,000 volunteers it has sent overseas since 1961.⁷ The sample was selected using a proportionate stratified sampling method. Volunteers were grouped into six regional categories: Atlantic Canada, Quebec, Ontario, the Prairies, British Columbia, and the Territories. Our sample also included groups from four "eras" of serving overseas (1960s, 1970s, 1980s, 1990s and 2000s). We randomly but proportionately selected from each regional sub-group; for example, more volunteers have come from Ontario than from other parts of Canada, so more of our sample came from that province.

The survey was a self-administered questionnaire distributed by mail; respondents also had the option to complete the survey online. We ran the survey from October to December 2005. A postcard reminder was sent to the entire sample by mail. Two e-mail reminders were sent to those volunteers who provided e-mail addresses.

A total of 647 respondents completed the survey, yielding a response rate of 56%. Sixty-three percent (63%) of respondents completed the survey online; 37% returned it through the mail. Because questionnaires provide only a limited scan of a volunteer's characteristics and environment, we also conducted in-depth interviews with 40 survey respondents.⁸

The 647 survey respondents answered most but not all of the closed-ended questions and 317 offered answers to the open-ended questions.⁹ Responses to open-ended questions have been combined with the results of the in-depth interviews to provide the qualitative data that helps inform our analysis and conclusions.

Although our sample was randomly selected, there is no way of knowing whether there are significant differences between those who completed the questionnaire and those who did not. It is possible that people who responded to the survey were more likely to be volunteers than those who did not

⁷ It is important to note that our research is not about CUSO or any specific organization. It is about what the experience of overseas volunteering has meant to these Canadians on return home. CUSO, like other organizations, has sent volunteers to work for a variety of organizations and international bodies (e.g. the United Nations). We therefore believe that our survey results are applicable not only to the 11,000 people who have volunteered through CUSO, but also to the thousands of Canadians who have served overseas with other volunteer organizations.

⁸ The survey included their contact information.

⁹ Where necessary the number of respondents who answered a particular closed-ended question is given. The following open-ended questions were asked: (1) How has your overseas experience influenced your current levels of volunteering? (2) How has your overseas experience influenced your choice of volunteering activities? (3) Describe how your overseas experience has affected your volunteer work in Canada.

respond. Active volunteers may be more inclined to complete such a survey out of a sense of civic duty, or they may be proud of their charitable activity and wish to ensure that their efforts are counted.

The characteristics of the survey respondents are displayed in Table 2. Approximately half the respondents were female (49%) and half were male (51%). Just over a third (36%) lived in Ontario. Half (50%) had volunteered abroad in the 1960s or 1970s while the other half had volunteered abroad more recently. Almost all respondents (86%) were 35 years of age or older; over half (53%) were 55 or older.

There were no major differences between the characteristics of our survey respondents and the characteristics of all CUSO overseas volunteers (see Figures 1, 2, and 3). Therefore, we believe there are no substantial statistical biases in the data that cause concern about the representativeness of our sample. The sample was of sufficient size and demographic representation for us to have a statistical confidence of 95% that the responses we gathered in our study would hold true for the 11,000 Canadians who have volunteered abroad through CUSO.

Figure 1: Gender of all CUSO overseas volunteers and survey respondents

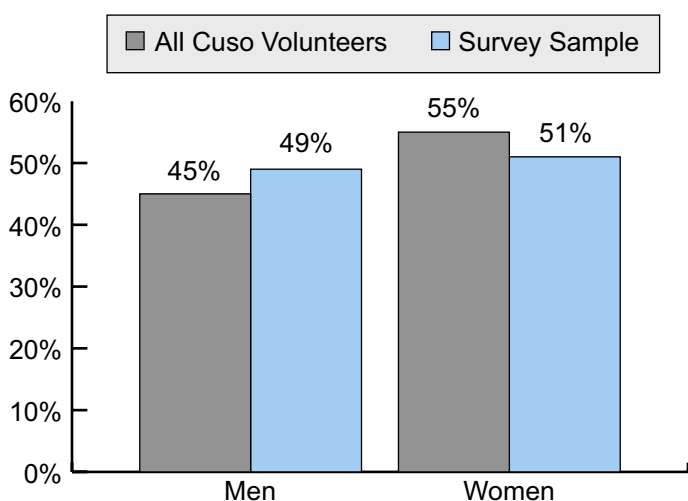
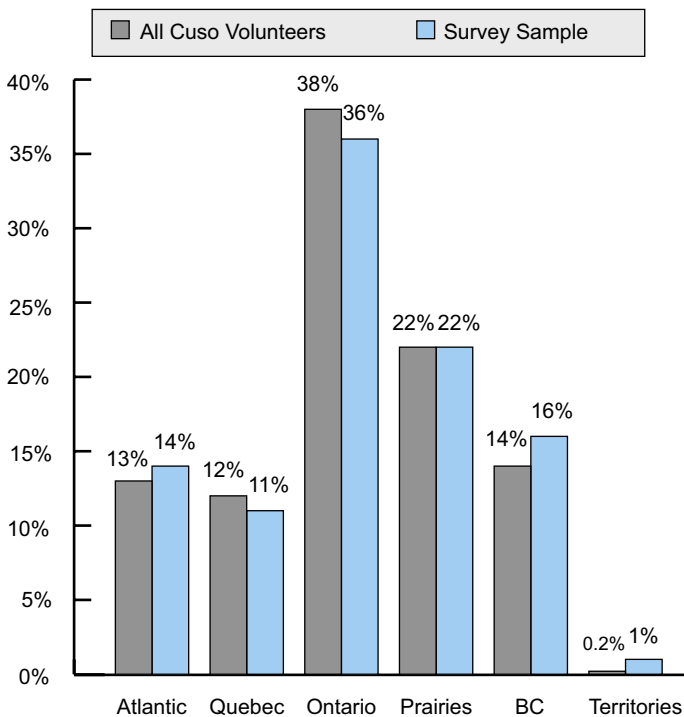


Table 2: Characteristics of survey respondents

	%	n
Gender		
Female	49	299
Male	51	313
Total	100	612
Region		
British Columbia	16	92
Northern Territories	1	7
Prairies	22	125
Ontario	36	209
Quebec	11	66
Atlantic Canada	14	81
Total	100	580
Era Abroad		
1960s	20	130
1970s	30	194
1980s	15	99
1990s	13	84
2000s	21	132
Total	99*	639
Age Group		
16 – 24	1	3
25 – 34	13	81
35 – 54	33	206
55 – 64	42	259
65+	11	69
Total	100	618

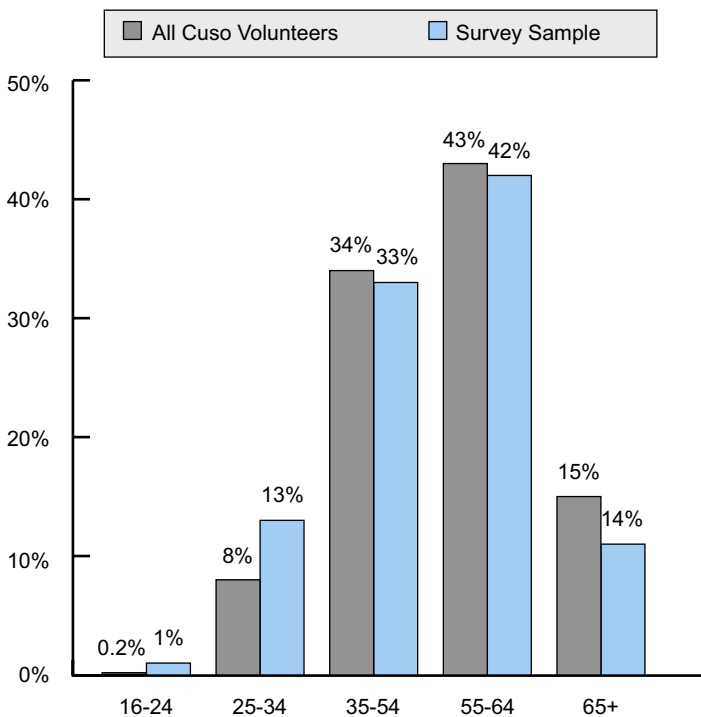
* Does not total 100 due to rounding.

Figure 2: Home region of all CUSO overseas volunteers and survey respondents



Note: Sample percentages are for the 580 respondents who answered this question. They represented 90% of the total sample of 647 respondents.

Figure 3: Age of all CUSO overseas volunteers and survey respondents



Note: Sample percentages are for the 618 respondents who answered this question. They represented 95% of the total sample of 647 respondents

In-depth interviews

As noted above, we interviewed 40 survey respondents who are currently active as volunteers in Canada. Interviewees were selected proportionately from the Canadian regions from which they were recruited and from the four eras during which they served overseas (see Table 3).

The volunteers we interviewed had all served abroad through CUSO. Fourteen had also participated in additional overseas postings with VSO, CESO, CIDA, InterPares, WUSC, Canadian Teachers' Federation, Canadian Crossroads International, United Nations, Oxfam-Quebec, Canadian Physicians for Aid and Relief, and university projects.

Questions posed to the interviewees included the following:

1. How has volunteering overseas affected the way you feel about volunteering in Canada and about the concept of volunteering in general?
2. Did you go overseas because of a commitment to volunteering, or did the commitment come after a posting abroad?
3. How has your overseas experience influenced the focus of the volunteering you do in Canada?
4. How has your overseas experience influenced the amount of time you volunteer in Canada?
5. Has your overseas experience been of benefit to your volunteering activities in Canada?
6. Did the overseas posting offer new skills and experiences that you might not have had the opportunity to acquire in Canada?
7. After returning to Canada from your last overseas posting, were there any difficulties or obstacles to volunteering in Canada?

Table 3: Characteristics of interviewees

	%	n
Gender		
Female	55	22
Male	45	18
Region		
British Columbia	5	2
Prairies	25	10
Ontario	40	16
Quebec	10	4
Atlantic Canada	20	8
Era Abroad		
1960s	18	7
1970s	22	9
1980s	22	9
1990s	18	7
2000s	20	8

Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating

To see how the behaviour of returned overseas volunteers differs from the behaviour of Canadians in general, we compared some of the results of our survey to the results of the 2004 Canada Survey of Giving Volunteering and Participating (CSGVP). The 2004 CSGVP is based on a representative sample of 20,832 Canadians aged 15 and older. It explored volunteering, donating, and participating over the 12-month period preceding the survey, which were conducted from September 13 to December 19, 2004 (Hall, Lasby, Gumulka, & Tryon, 2006).¹⁰

¹⁰ The comparison between our survey and the CSGVP can only be tentative as the surveys were not identical with regard to design and implementation.

Research results

Our goal was to explore how an overseas posting affects the type of volunteering returned Canadians engage in, how much they volunteer, what type of organizations or community groups they volunteer with, and what effect their experience in the developing world has on the quality of their volunteering.

We posed a series of qualitative and quantitative questions and examined them in detail for answers. In some cases, we unearthed new questions. Where appropriate, we compared our data to the CSGVP.

Volunteer activity of returned volunteers

Canadians who volunteered abroad tend to be active volunteers on return to Canada. Not only are these returned volunteers more likely to volunteer than all Canadians, but they contribute more volunteer hours.

Two thirds (67%) of Canadians who have volunteered overseas get involved in volunteer activities in Canada through charitable or nonprofit organizations and community groups. In comparison, the CSGVP found that only 45% of all Canadians volunteer through a nonprofit organization.¹¹ Returned volunteers who volunteered in Canada contributed an average of 241 hours between September 2004 and September 2005. By contrast, in the 12-month period covered by the 2004 CSGVP, Canadian volunteers contributed an average of 168 hours each.

The average number of hours contributed annually by returned volunteers is quite high, but the amount of time contributed by the most active of these volunteers is even more impressive. A quarter (25%)

of returned volunteers contributed an average of 606 hours and accounted for 57% of all volunteer hours contributed by our sample. By comparison, according to the CSGVP, the most active 25% of Canadian volunteers accounted for over three quarters (77%) of all volunteer hours.

We asked both those who volunteered and those who did not if the time period covered by our survey reflected their general volunteering patterns. Ten percent (10%) said they usually volunteer less than they did during the survey period, 57% said they usually volunteer about the same amount, and 33% said they usually volunteer more.

Our findings suggest that returned overseas volunteers are among the most active volunteers in Canada. This should not be surprising. Anyone who serves abroad is, by definition, highly motivated, enough to dedicate months or even years to an overseas posting. They are willing to make financial sacrifices, interrupt their careers, and endure potentially difficult living and working conditions. Another factor that might explain the high levels of volunteering by returned volunteers is education. Canadians who volunteer in the developing world tend to be highly educated; they are, after all, selected for their knowledge and skills as well as their attitudes. Ninety-eight percent (98%) of returned volunteers have a post-secondary education. The CSGVP found that volunteering increases with the level of formal education completed and that Canadians with university degrees volunteer at the highest rate (59%).

¹¹ All CSGVP results are from Hall et al. (2006).

Which came first, the volunteer or the volunteering?

There is a “chicken and egg” question at the heart of this research. Did these Canadians go overseas because they were already active volunteers committed to the idea of nonprofit service? Or did the experience of volunteering in the developing world awaken a desire to serve on return to Canada? The information gathered through the 40 interviews and the 317 respondents who answered the open-ended questions in our survey suggests that the former is the case.

Many of the survey respondents noted that they were committed to the idea of volunteering before they went overseas and were active as volunteers in Canada. Moreover, most of the returned volunteers who were interviewed (88%) said they volunteered before they signed up for their overseas posting.¹²

As one returned volunteer summarized it:

“You know, I have a feeling that your research is sort of looking to see how [an overseas posting] influenced volunteering in Canada. And it’s really the other way around! The kind of person who takes on a volunteer position overseas is naturally a volunteer.”

Another said:

“I volunteer simply because it comes from a sense of obligation, which just may be the reason I went overseas in the first place.”

Two thirds (26) of the returned volunteers we interviewed, as well as many survey respondents, said that the overseas experience had very little effect on their current levels of volunteer activity in Canada.

“Before I went overseas I did a great deal of volunteer work. In fact, my local volunteer work in Canada is what helped me make the decision to go overseas. Now that I am back in Canada I still do a great deal of volunteer work. I don’t believe my volunteer experience has really influenced my level of volunteering in Canada.”

“I don’t think my overseas time affects me. I tend to volunteer on things I have an interest in at any given time, and the amount of time I can offer comes from where I am in life. Children are the biggest factor.”

For some returned volunteers, volunteering – at home or abroad – is a legacy of their upbringing. A handful volunteered out of religious obligation.

“I was raised by parents who encouraged and instilled a sense of duty about working for or aiding others beyond regular employment, and so I had that influence before going overseas, and I still have that feeling.”

“I went overseas because I felt that’s where God wanted me to be, at that time in my life. I volunteer now because I feel that that’s what God wants me to do with my time.”

¹² Note that, for the qualitative results, when w□ that particular point.

Regardless of the origins of their volunteer beliefs, returned volunteers spoke of a commitment to volunteer service before and after their overseas placements. They stressed that they would be active volunteers even if they had not gone abroad.

“I have to say I would have volunteered in Canada anyways, because I was raised in an environment where it’s your duty. The more you have, the more responsibility you had to share what you got. So I would have volunteered anyways.”

“I don’t know if it really changed my way of looking at volunteerism, because it was with this attitude that I went overseas in the first place. I wanted to volunteer and I just like volunteering.”

Some returned volunteers who responded to the survey, and about a third (12) of the interviewees, said that the time they devoted to volunteering increased after their overseas postings. These volunteers often said that they had come to understand “how lucky we are.”

“Being overseas made me aware of how fortunate we are in Canada, which is the best place in the world to live, work, and raise a family. Because of this appreciation, I feel a need to give back even more as a volunteer.”

However, a few volunteers found that their commitment to volunteering waned on arrival back in Canada. One person, who returned keener to volunteer acknowledged:

“...an initial effect that wore off with time.”

Another noted:

“When I first came back, I jumped in and was involved in a lot of different community organizing, but then I burned myself out. I had to cut back.”

A number of returned volunteers were relatively young when they journeyed abroad, so their postings were the beginning of their sustained volunteering habits.

“I was young, in my 20s, when I went to Nigeria, so it sort of established my commitment to true volunteering. The overseas experience ingrained a confidence, I would say, that volunteering does make a difference.”

An overseas posting can be on a continuum of volunteering for returned volunteers. It is, as one person put it,

“...a volunteer’s right of passage. It would be difficult to do with young children, and maybe not even fair to them, so we volunteered overseas before we had kids. We now have kids, but still volunteer in Canada.”

Very few returned volunteers who responded to the survey, and only two of those interviewed, reported a decrease in volunteer hours that could be attributed directly to their overseas experience (as opposed to lifestyle variables such as work or family obligations). This decline was most often an issue of transition, although there is also the potential of burn-out.

“It has had a negative affect on my volunteering, because of time, money and headspace. This is a transition time for me and my family. We are still integrating back in Canada.”

“You can easily burn out overseas. And I did.”

An increased commitment to volunteering

Although many survey respondents and interviewees said that the overseas experience did not affect their level of volunteer activity in Canada, they noted that it increased their commitment to the idea of volunteering.

“I’ve become a volunteer junky. Going overseas had an extremely positive impact in many ways, not only in international social justice, but also on the need to contribute to my home community.”

“I’m much more aware now of the necessity of volunteering in Canada, even if I don’t have the time to do it right now. But I will when I retire. There are so many places that need good people. My feeling towards volunteerism is stronger because I’ve gone overseas.”

The deepened commitment of many returned volunteers was strengthened by the people with whom they lived and worked overseas who volunteered to assist in community development even though it was a struggle for them.

“I always remember the people I worked with in Jamaica – people who had to walk

miles to get water, who struggled to read even the simplest sentence, who had to gather wood in the bush to build a fire before they could cook, who had to stand at the side of the road for hours before a relatively empty bus would stop for them – the same people who volunteered faithfully to build a better community, despite the hardships that made finding any amount of time in their day very difficult.”

These memories help sustain returned volunteers’ later volunteer efforts even when the going gets rough. They have also seen the results of volunteering and can draw on those first-hand experiences for motivation.

“At first, working in the context of a developing nation gave me an overwhelming sense that nothing one does will ever be enough to really make a difference. That was in the first few weeks of my CUSO position. But by the end of my stay my perception was completely altered and I had accepted the fact that any volunteering one does, no matter how small it seems, is worthwhile.”

“As a result of my overseas experience I feel that volunteering can be valuable no matter how much or how little time one has to volunteer, no matter what one’s social status or education. People with very little often gave their time to make the lives of others less harsh in many different ways.”

Surprisingly, given the scope of difficulties afflicting many parts of the world, few returned volunteers said that they had come back with the view that societal

problems are intractable and that volunteer efforts are but drops in the bucket.

village has motivated me strongly to take an active part in my 'village' even if it's a city neighbourhood."

One of the more fascinating findings from this research is that leaving Canada to live in a different community (and in another culture) deepened the commitment of many returned volunteers to their own community once they returned home.

A few returned volunteers said they still volunteer at the local level but now look at different issues because of their overseas experience. Two went so far as to say they must get involved at home first.

These Canadians spoke of a desire to "give back to the community" and to "volunteer wherever you are." Some even said that they only learned the true importance of community while overseas, as village life and extended families are central to many cultures in the developing world.

"My overseas experience showed me that I need to be involved in helping achieve political, social, economic equality in my own country before I could begin to think of telling other people how to order affairs in their own country. For this reason, since my return, I have declined involvement in international development work."

"I had a profound realization of the impact and the importance of 'community' and the power of giving back to community."

"One wise African man said to a bunch of us who wanted to help 'go back and figure out how it works in Canada and then we can talk.'"

"Seeing how people lived when they expected to spend a lifetime in their own

Table 4: Percentage volunteering and average number of hours volunteered by era (Sample size 639)

Era of first overseas volunteer posting	Volunteer rate	Average annual volunteer hours
1960s	70%	265
1970s	71%	217
1980s	76%	212
1990s	57%	274
2000s	55%	243

Volunteering patterns by era of overseas placement, age, and gender

The tendency to volunteer on return to Canada varied according to the era when overseas volunteers served. Those who served in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s were more likely to volunteer in Canada than were those who had served in the 1990s or 2000s (see Table 4). Those who volunteered overseas in the 1980s were the most likely to have volunteered during the 12-months covered by our survey (76%). However, this variation in volunteer activity may be more a reflection of the age of the volunteers rather than the historical circumstances of when they went overseas.

The likelihood of volunteering in Canada appears to be related to the length of the time spent abroad. Canadians who had overseas posting(s) of 12 months or longer were more likely to volunteer in Canada than were those whose posting was shorter in duration (see Table 5).

The number of postings overseas had no effect on the amount volunteer activity in Canada once people returned. Returned volunteers who served less than a year overseas had the lowest volunteer rate, but contributed the most hours.

As noted above, we believe that general patterns of volunteering are influenced more by age and stage of life than by the decade when people went abroad. As Table 6 shows, the volunteer rate among returned volunteers increases with age. Only 43% of those aged 25 to 34 volunteered in the 12 months prior to our survey, compared to 67% of those aged 35 to 54, 70% of those aged 55 to 64, and 74% of those 65 and older.

Although the 25-34 age group had the lowest volunteer rate, those in this age range contributed the highest average volunteer hours per year (299). The next highest contribution was by returned volunteers aged 65 years or older, who contributed on average 276 hours per year. This is higher than the national average of 245 hours that the CSGVP reports for this age group. It is not surprising that many returned volunteers who are 65 and older see retirement or children leaving home as an opportunity to get more involved in their communities.

“Now that I am retired and I don’t have to look after the kids, I can volunteer much more.”

“Now that I’m retired, I need things to get me out of bed in the morning, so I volunteer.”

Table 5: Volunteer rate and volunteer hours contributed by duration of longest placement overseas

Duration of longest overseas placement	Volunteered in last year	Annual average volunteer hours contributed	Number of respondents
Less than 1 year	50%	294	47
1 – 2 years	70%	252	227
3 – 5 years	68%	197	130
5 or more years	65%	295	19

“If I don’t volunteer, retirement might mean lawn bowling and drinking too much coffee with other retirees.”

“I’m getting older and my physical health is a bit limiting for me. But the good thing about getting older is that you are more selective in what you put your energy into.”

Survey respondents in the 25-34 and 35-54 age groups said that time constraints due to family obligations and work demands, as well as financial considerations, were the most important barriers to more volunteering.¹³ This might account for the lower participation rate among the 25-34 age group and the fewer hours allocated to volunteering among the 34-54 age group.

In interviews, returned volunteers named life stage as the most important factor in determining whether they could volunteer and how much time they could offer.

“The amount of time I volunteer is influenced mainly by the amount of time I have to spend at my job. My job leaves me little time and energy to volunteer.”

“It has been difficult to maintain a stable lifestyle for my family on a consistent basis. This did not make it easier to do volunteer work because I had to put in as much time as I could into finding a job with an adequate salary.”

“Once we put down roots and started a family, there just wasn’t a lot of time to volunteer.”

There were no major difference in the volunteer rates of male and female returned volunteers (62% and 69% respectively). Likewise, men and women who have volunteered overseas contribute a similar number of hours to volunteer activity in Canada (an average of 243 hours per year for men and 246 hours for women).

Table 6: Volunteer rate and volunteer hours contributed by age

Age group	Volunteered in last year	Annual average volunteer hours contributed	Number of respondents
25 – 34 years old	43%	299	35
35 – 54 years old	67%	207	137
55 – 64 years old	70%	250	181
65 or more years old	74%	276	51

Note: The sample for the 16-24 year-old age group is too small to make any assertions about their volunteer activities.

¹³ Average annual household income was \$□ older.

Volunteering patterns by education and income

The CSGVP found that volunteering tends to increase with level of education, but our study did not show major differences based on education level (see Table 7). This is probably due to the low variability in education levels in our sample. Of the 407 respondents who answered the question on educational level, 98% had a college certificate or above and 90% had at least one university degrees.

The CSGVP shows a substantial difference in volunteer rates by annual household income. The percentage of Canadians who volunteer rises from a low of 30% for those with household incomes of less than \$20,000 per year to a high of 60% for those with household incomes of \$100,000 per year or more.

In our survey, low household income also appears to be associated with lower volunteer rates on return to Canada (see Table 8). Volunteers with annual household incomes under \$20,000 had the lowest volunteer rate (53%) while those with annual household incomes between \$60,000 and \$79,000 per year had the highest (73%).

The average number of volunteer hours that returned volunteers contribute annually declines as household income rises (see Table 8). This finding is similar to the CSGVP. Returned volunteers whose annual household income is less than \$20,000 contributed an average of 408 hours per year compared to 247 hours among those in the \$40,000 to \$59,999 income bracket, and 185 hours among those with household incomes greater than \$100,000.

Table 7: Volunteer rate and volunteer hours contributed by educational level

Educational level	Volunteered in last year	Annual average volunteer hours contributed	Number of respondents
College certificate or diploma	58%	238	36
Undergraduate degree	66%	242	179
Graduate degree	67%	241	186

Note: □ hours contributed.

Table 8: Volunteer rate and volunteer hours contributed by household income

Household income	Volunteered in last year	Annual average volunteer hours contributed	Number of respondents
Under \$20,000	53%	408	32
\$20,000 – \$39,999	65%	324	67
\$ 40,000 – \$59,999	64%	247	69
\$60,000 – \$79,999	73%	202	72
\$80,000 – \$99,999	70%	182	65
\$100,000 or more	63%	185	89

The CSGVP also found that the average number of hours volunteered annually tended to decline with increasing household income. Volunteers with household incomes under \$20,000 volunteered an average of 177 hours and those with household incomes greater than \$100,000 contributed 155 hours per year, on average.

Regional differences in volunteering patterns

Returned overseas volunteers living in different regions of the country had different volunteer rates (see Table 9). Returned volunteers from the three northern territories had higher volunteer rates than those from the provinces. The difference was largest between the territories (86%) and Quebec (61%). However, respondents from the territories comprised only 1.5% of our sample, which makes drawing conclusions about these differences problematic.

Excluding the three northern territories, returned volunteers living in the Prairies were the most likely to have volunteered during the year covered by our survey (75%), followed closely by returnees living in British Columbia (73%). Returned volunteers living in Ontario and Quebec were the least likely to volunteer (65% and 61% respectively).

There were also regional differences in the average number of hours returned volunteers contributed (see Table 9). Returned volunteers from Quebec contributed the most volunteer hours (an average of 335 per year).

It is tempting to compare the regional volunteer rates of returned volunteers and the hours they contribute on average per year to the CSGVP. However, our sample was not a nationally representative sample and so comparisons to regional information from the CSGVP would not be appropriate.

Choice of nonprofit organization with which to volunteer

Returned overseas volunteers who volunteer in Canada tend to get involved with more than one organization. Nearly half (44%) of the returned volunteers who volunteered in Canada volunteered with three or more organizations and 85% offered their services to two groups. Only 15% limited their volunteering to just one organization. This finding sets returned volunteers apart from other Canadian volunteers, 50% of whom volunteer for only one organization. Only 22% of volunteers in Canada are involved with three or more groups.

Table 9: Volunteer rate and volunteer hours contributed by region

Region or province	Volunteered in last year	Annual average volunteer hours contributed	Number of respondents
Atlantic	70%	218	57
Quebec	61%	335	40
Ontario	65%	239	137
Prairies	75%	229	94
British Columbia	73%	261	69
Territories	86%	115	6

Education/literacy/research groups (24%), organizations involved in community development and poverty alleviation (24%), arts and culture groups (23%), religious groups (21%), international development (20%) and health (20%) are the primary beneficiaries of returned volunteers' time (see Figure 4). The category 'other', which comprised 18% of the responses, included unions, peace groups, youth groups, credit unions and co-operatives, animal protection groups, disability organizations, and immigration and refugee support agencies.

The 2004 CSGVP found that Canadian volunteers are most likely to support sports and recreation, social services, education and research, and religious groups. Returned volunteers mentioned these types of organizations, but they also reported that they volunteered with organizations that have strong

community development, environment, international commitment, and human rights mandates. This is not surprising, given that the majority of overseas postings in the developing world are in the areas of community economic development, education, health, environment, human rights, and governance.

One might expect that after an overseas experience in a global development context, returned volunteers would volunteer for organizations with international mandates. However, we found that 63% of returned volunteers undertake volunteer activities for organizations that focus efforts mostly on domestic issues; 29% volunteer with organizations that focus on both domestic and international issues; and 7% volunteer with organizations that focus mostly on international issues (see Figure 5).

Figure 4: Activity area of organizations for which returned volunteers volunteered

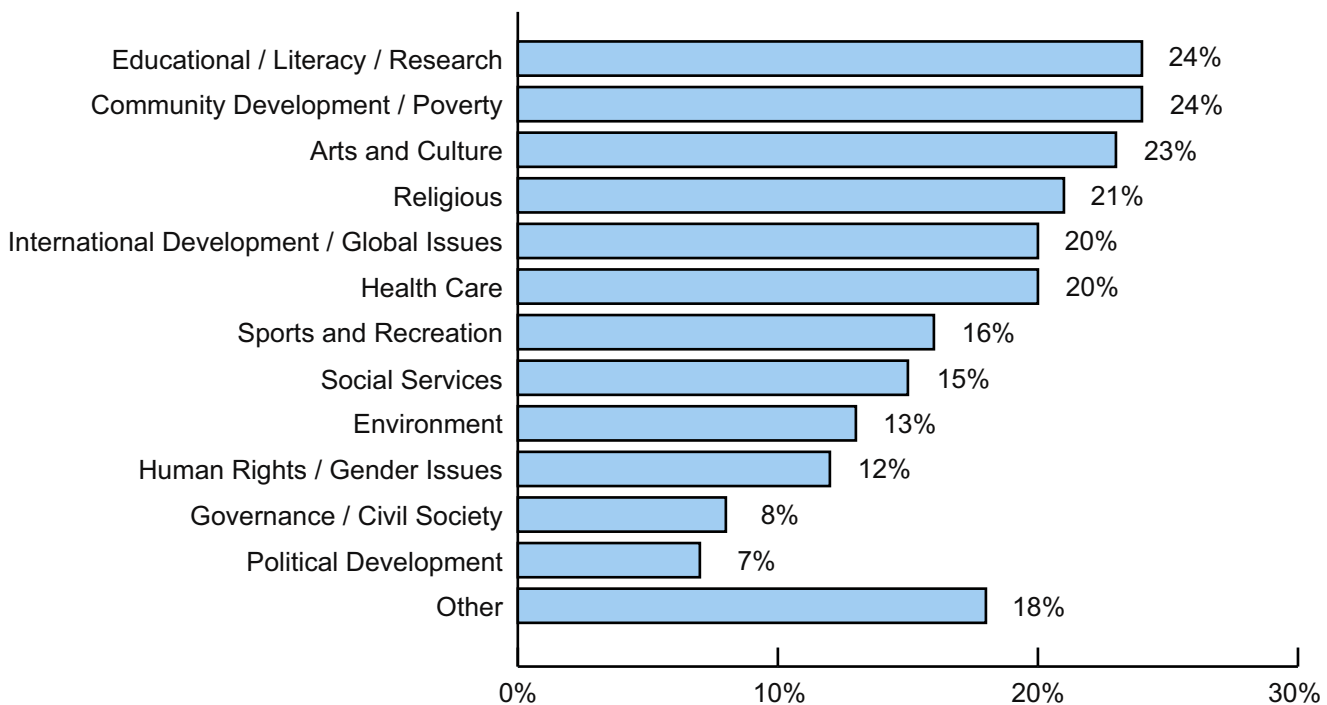
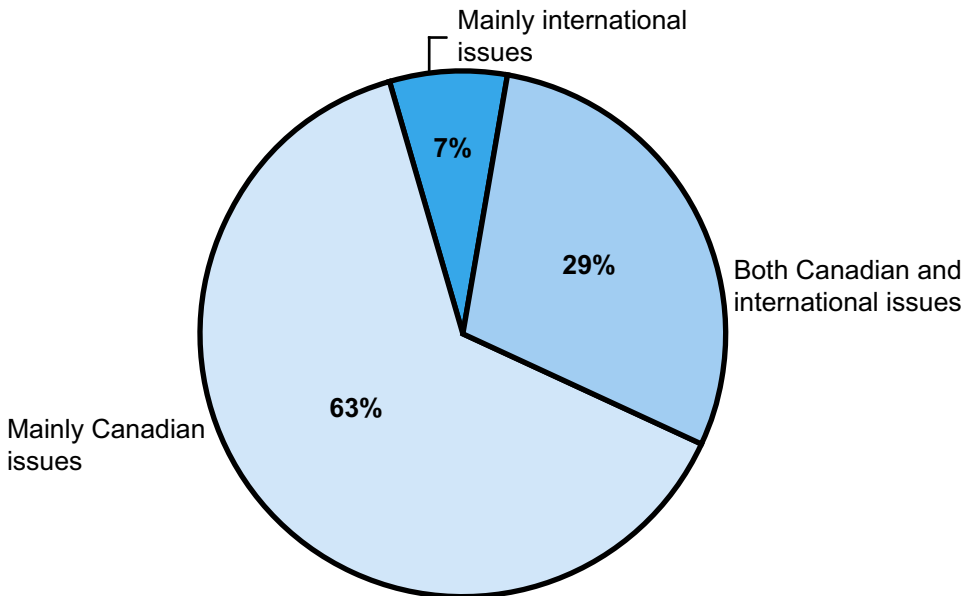


Figure 5: Focus of volunteer activity for returning overseas volunteers



Note: Percentages do not add to 100 due to rounding. Sample size = 417.

Almost all of the interviewees and many survey respondents talked about how their overseas postings deepened their knowledge of international development and broadened their worldviews.

“Without question, it opens up your eyes to another part of the world. I say sometimes that I went to school at a university in Canada, but I was educated in Africa.”

“I used to be very focused on local development. I still am, but rather than considering issues that only affect my immediate environment I am now more interested in working or volunteering with groups that have a global impact.”

“I have a better awareness on how the other areas of the world live and how what we do here impacts them in the long term. I am not as parochial or narrow-minded, but can see the big picture.”

“I like to bring a global view to local work and a local view to global volunteer work.”

One volunteer likened the experience of seeing the world beyond his borders in the following way:

“a minor psychological revelation analogous to the notion that the universe did not rotate around the Earth.”

This broadened worldview may explain why 36% of returned volunteers get involved with organizations that have some link with international issues. It might also explain why, when they volunteer with Canadian-focused organizations, they often deal with immigrants, refugees, and international students. Several returned volunteers became involved with initiatives that relate to Canada’s role in the global village.

“My overseas volunteering focused on supporting communities affected by multinational companies. Since returning to Canada, I’ve focused on working on Canadian corporate accountability overseas.”

Three of the Canadians we interviewed have helped to set up globally-minded organizations, including an alternative travel agency, a fair trade group, and an NGO that supports HIV/AIDS projects in Southern Africa.

On the one hand, it may seem surprising that only 7% of returned volunteers are focused exclusively on international development. On the other hand, returned volunteers come back to Canada and have to live somewhere, and that locale, its unique needs and characteristics, and the life they establish or

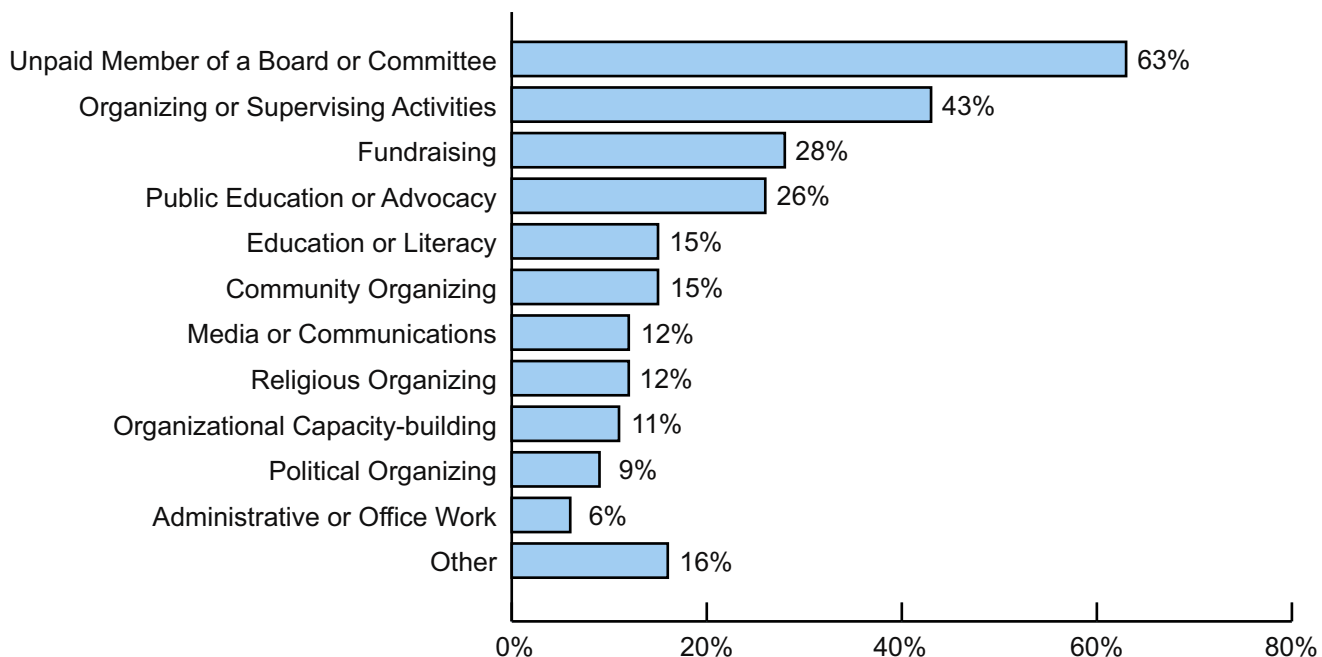
re-establish there, are key determinants in their volunteer priorities. Returned volunteers may come home as global citizens, but they have not revoked their Canadian citizenship.

Activities and motivations

The four most common activities of returned volunteers are serving as a member of a board of directors or committee (63%), organizing or supervising activities and events (43%), fundraising (28%), and public education or advocacy (26%, see Figure 6).

The majority of the returned volunteers we interviewed felt that their overseas experience did not affect the type of volunteer activity they engage in. Regardless of the focus of the work, returned volunteers, like most people, do what they enjoy or feel capable of doing. Although their skill-set may have increased overseas,

Figure 6: Most common volunteer activities of returned volunteers

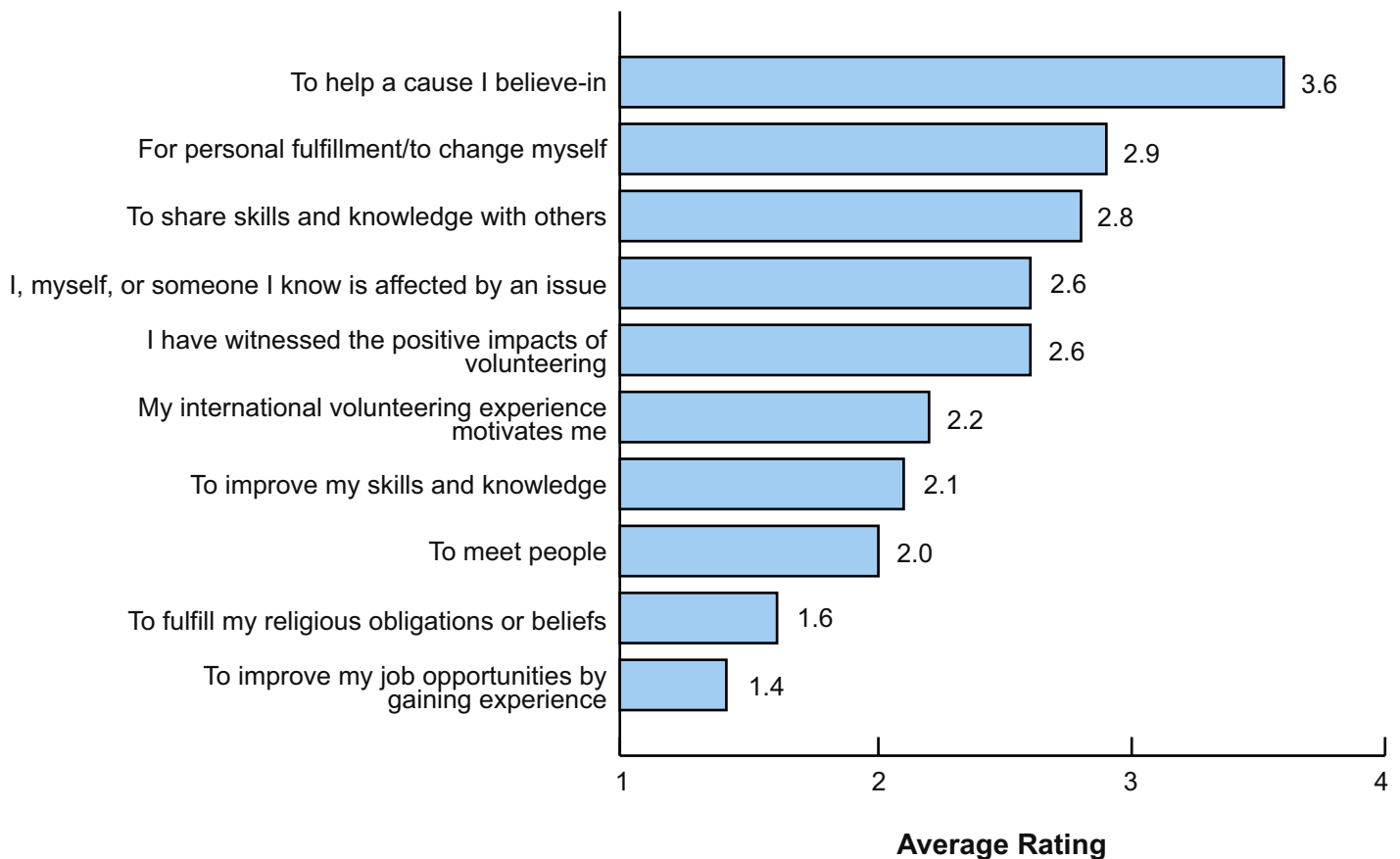


it is still a person's preferences that, for the most part, determine what specific activities they take on.

Survey respondents were asked to rate the importance of different motivations for volunteering on a four-point scale where 1 meant not important and 4 meant extremely important (see Figure 7). The findings indicated that their most important reasons for volunteering for an organization were to support

a cause they believed in (average rating of 3.6), for personal fulfillment or to challenge themselves (2.9), and to share their skills and knowledge with others (2.8). International volunteer experience was ranked as only a "somewhat important" motivation for current volunteering (2.2). This is consistent with the notion that most returned volunteers were committed to the idea of volunteering before going overseas and were already active as volunteers in Canada.

Figure 7: Importance of different motivations for volunteering



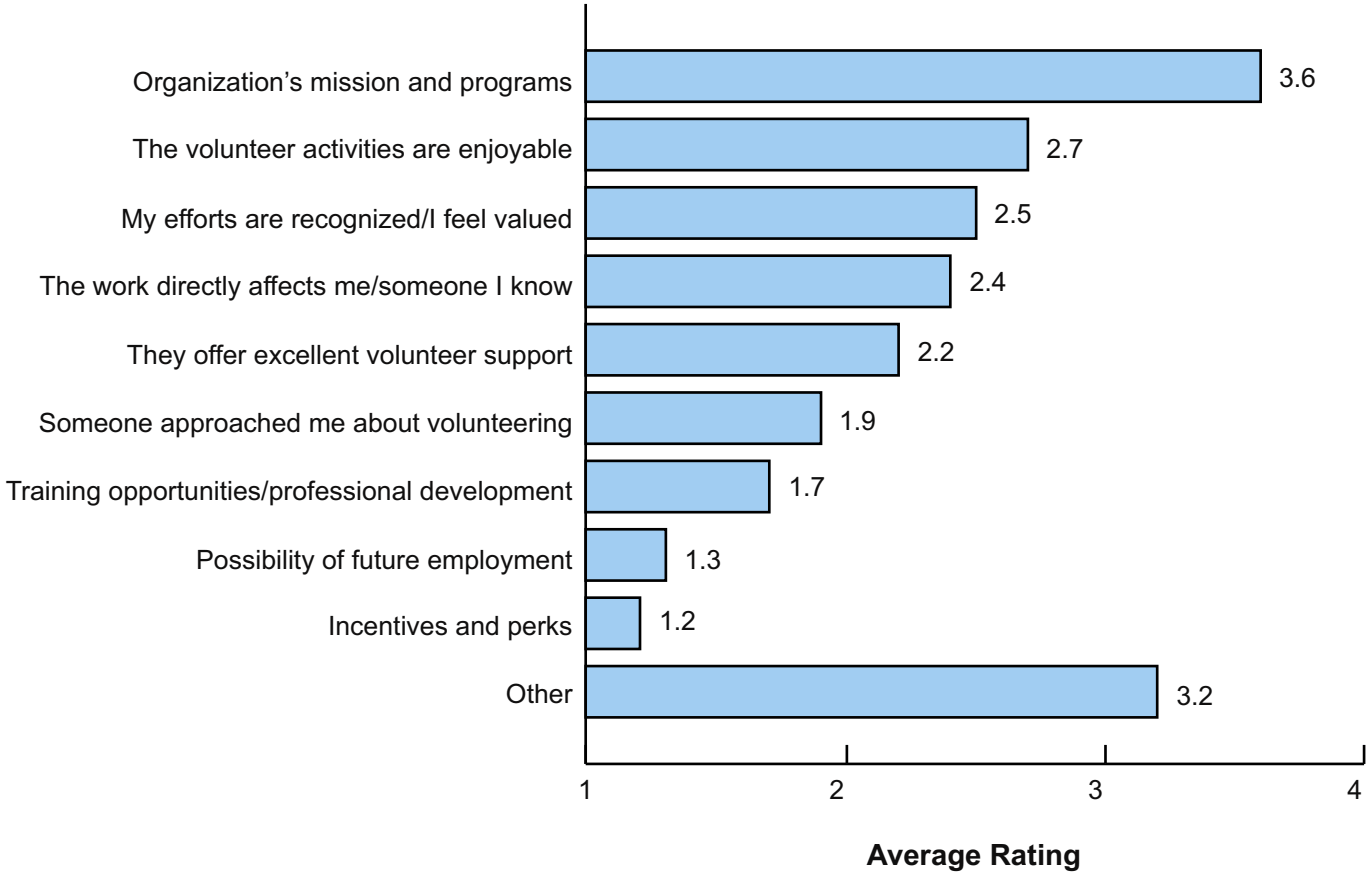
Note: 1 = Not Important; 2 = Somewhat Important; 3 = Quite Important; 4 = Extremely Important.

We also asked survey respondents why they became involved with a particular organization (see Figure 8). This information could be useful to organizations that hope to attract and better utilize returned overseas volunteers. By far the most important reasons for volunteering for a particular organization were the organization’s mission and programs (average rating of 3.6 out of 4). Reasons included in the ‘other’ category were also ranked as very important (3.2). The most common reasons included in this category were because the organization helped the volunteer to give back to a community, remain involved in international development, meet like-minded people, and gain spiritual fulfillment.

Impact of overseas experience on volunteers’ effectiveness in Canada

Although returned volunteers may have already been motivated volunteers before going overseas, for many the experience deepened their commitment to volunteering. A stint overseas also provides experiences and skills that will add to what they can offer as volunteers once they return to Canada. From our interviews and open-ended survey questions, we discovered psychological and practical benefits to volunteering that emerge from the overseas experience. With regard to an individual volunteer’s outlook and disposition, four benefits stand out:

Figure 8: Importance of different factors in influencing choice of where to volunteer



Note: 1 = Not Important; 2 = Somewhat Important; 3 = Quite Important; 4 = Extremely Important.

- increased confidence;
- increased flexibility and resourcefulness;
- increased patience, tolerance, and openness; and
- new or enhanced skills.

We discuss each of these below.

Confidence

Many returned volunteers who completed our survey, and a majority of those we interviewed, mentioned the confidence they gained from volunteering overseas.

“It makes you grow up. It makes you develop a tremendous amount of self-confidence in what you are going to do, no matter where it is, in the future. I was 23 when I lived in the bush in Tanzania, running a 600,000-acre game reserve.”

“I came home after three years with skills and confidence. In fact, it took me a few years back in Canada to find my stride after having been able to do so much and give so much as a nurse in Kenya.”

“I was able to see that I had what it took to deal with challenging situations and that I had initiative. It allowed me to see that I could manage things for myself.”

“It was a very quick maturing process where the development of my leadership and organization skills were constantly tested without the normal support networks we take for granted in Canada. In simple terms, I became a ‘can do’ guy for causes I believe in.”

As a consequence of the responsibility they had and the confidence they gained overseas, returned volunteers reported that they were more self-reliant and effective volunteers, better able to take initiative and show leadership.

Flexibility and resourcefulness

Many returned overseas volunteers spoke of the flexibility and resourcefulness they gained overseas. They are better able to think on their feet and ‘roll with the punches’ when efforts go awry.

“Volunteering overseas gave me the skills to be creative, flexible, and think outside the box. When services weren’t available, I developed them myself.”

“It was good to see that your way isn’t the best or only way to do things. It’s good to see that people with different ideas are also accomplishing things. I also learned about time. Things could happen overseas in a slower, less rigid way, and you learn not to get too upset.”

“The biggest influence has been the openness and the flexibility I learned overseas, and a new ability to be open to other cultures. That openness extends to openness to new ideas and new activities.”

Patience, tolerance, and openness

Many returned volunteers reported an increased level of patience and tolerance towards individuals, cultures, and the various situations in which people find themselves.

“On a personal level, I think it really developed a deep reserve of patience and tolerance. I think I was already a fairly tolerant person, but I’m not sure I was necessarily a patient person. But I think when you’re overseas in those situations you have to have a certain degree of self-discovery.”

“I have learned group dynamics, how to get things done, patience, and empathy. I’m more aware of others’ points-of-view, of their differences and desires.”

“I am more accepting and understanding of other cultures and wisdom traditions of the world.”

Several returned volunteers brought up the notion of humility.

“Before I went overseas, I thought I was following participatory methodologies, particularly when working with the homeless. When I went overseas, because I was a ‘guest’ in the community, I made a point to listen much, much more than I talked. This taught me so much about true participatory involvement because I saw how community development evolved when everyone truly had an equal voice, regardless of education, literacy, or material wealth. It was very humbling.”

“I think you tend to realize that you’re not going to solve all the world’s problems. When you’re younger and optimistic and full of enthusiasm, I think you have a different

attitude towards helping others. As you get older, you get a little more jaded, you get a little more realistic, and you say, well you know, maybe it’s a drop in the bucket, but it’s better than nothing at all.”

One returned volunteer felt that the overseas experience marked the end of his naiveté.

“My overseas experience humbled me and showed me that the black-and-white, good-or-bad way I’d previously viewed the world was naïve and unworkable. My experience taught me patience and a healthy bit of cynicism.”

Many returned volunteers in our survey and interviews said that their overseas experience opened their eyes about privilege and how lucky people in Canada are.

“Life here is cozy in Canada. We are spoiled rotten and have a very good life really, in comparison to our neighbours in other countries.”

“I am more conscious of how blessed we are in this country and how important it is to share our good fortune with others.”

“I learned the value of working with marginalized people and how my own lifestyle affects the lifestyle and opportunities of people in the developing world.”

“My exposure to developing countries and poverty, as well as all the things that go with poverty such as environmental degradation,

malnutrition, lack of human rights, etc., has made me very aware of how lucky we are in Canada and how important it is to participate in dealing with these issues.”

New or enhanced skills

Many returned volunteers in our survey and a majority of those interviewed, said they learned new skills overseas, either in their chosen area of expertise or in a different field. This new expertise is brought back to Canada and inevitably manifests itself in the returned volunteer’s life, be it through work or volunteering. These volunteers often reported that their posting abroad provided opportunities that would not exist in Canada to learn or practice new skills.¹⁴

“My overseas job gave me experience. It was an opportunity to get skills I wouldn’t have learned in Canada – and quickly. You are thrown right into it.”

“Overseas, I got the chance to learn skills that I wouldn’t have had the opportunity to learn in Canada at such a young age. I stumbled a lot abroad, but learned a lot. I came home after three years with skills and confidence.”

“It has given me experience, skills, and knowledge in areas very important to volunteering like organizing special events, campaigns, and programs.”

“I learned valuable skills in intercultural learning and communication, progressive management experience, critical

perspective about theories of change, and global perspective. I now have experience in working in teams and with diverse groups that has been most useful in my voluntary and employed work over the past 25 years.”

“I learned tons about community development, organizational development and about participatory research, education and communication, as well as analytical skills and knowledge of global economics and systems. All of these skills have contributed to what I can give as a volunteer, as well as in my paid employment.”

Lastly, most interviewees and many survey respondents mentioned the inter-cultural skills they had learned, which in some cases included a new language.

“I think that because I went overseas and met people of different backgrounds, different ways of thinking, different colours, religions, and so on, it has helped me understand the world today and to listen to other people.”

“I learned how to adapt to others, new ideas, new customs and foods, etc. I am extremely interested in language and cultural diversity and hope to do more to celebrate these topics.”

¹⁴ Even those who said they didn’t learn new skills
op□

learn or practice skills is an area worthy of discussion amongst volunteer-sending agencies.

. The ethics of sending Canadians abroad to

“I’m now more aware of the richness that new Canadians bring to communities in Canada.”

“Working overseas has given me confidence to enter into new situations, to interact comfortably with people of different cultural and social backgrounds.”

In an increasingly interconnected world, citizens with a broad worldview and cross-cultural sensitivities and abilities have cultural, social, and economic advantages for the country as a whole.

Reasons returned volunteers decide not to volunteer on return to Canada

We asked survey respondents to rate the importance of various barriers to volunteering or to additional volunteering (see Figure 9). The two barriers rated highest in importance were no extra time to devote to volunteering (average rating of 2.9 out of 4) and family commitments (2.3). Reasons grouped in the ‘other’ category rated 3.3 on average. This category includes a variety of barriers to volunteering such as travelling outside of Canada, rural or remote settings that do not offer volunteer opportunities, difficulty finding organizations matching personal philosophies, paid work that covers the field of volunteer interest, and making charitable donations in lieu of volunteering. Lower-income returned volunteers were more likely to cite ‘financial limitations’ and ‘health problems’ as barriers. One quarter (26%) of returned volunteers reported that they faced no barriers to volunteering.

In the interviews and in response to the open-ended survey questions, time constraints, family commitments, and economic circumstances were cited as the primary obstacles to volunteering in Canada. Only half a dozen returned volunteers felt

that serving abroad had had a detrimental effect on their volunteering in Canada. Mostly, this was due to a difficult transition back into Canadian society.

“Well, certainly my first year back there was a lot of culture shock...and I don’t think I did any volunteering that year. I think I just I froze to death!”

“It can take time to adjust to life back home and learn how things are done here in Canada.”

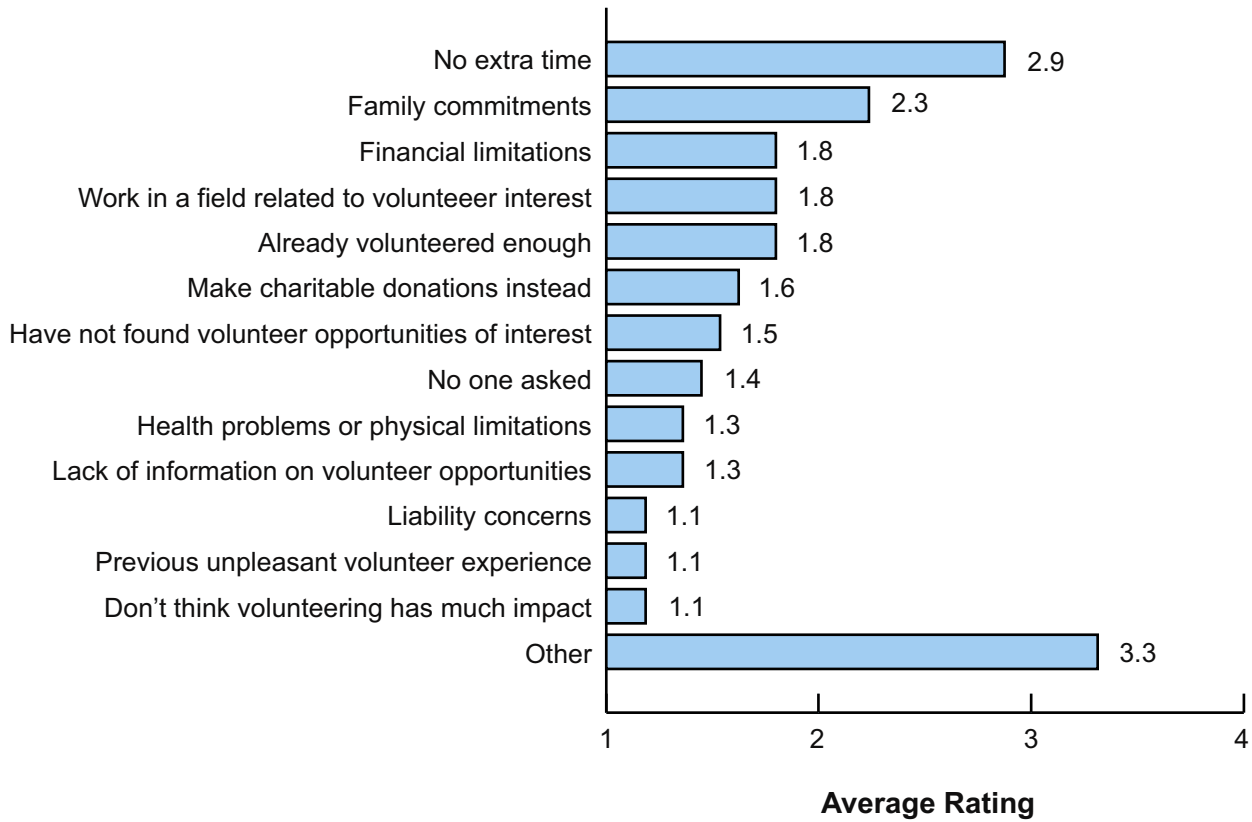
Volunteers noted that the organizations that sent them aboard could help ease this transition.

“I was disappointed that friends, family, and people in my community were not really all that interested about my experiences in Africa, or concerned about the living conditions there. I think that volunteers who return to Canada should be given more support in how to continue volunteering in activities and organizations, with both local and overseas groups.”

One volunteer commented on the difficulty of matching the emotional and intellectual intensity of their overseas experience with volunteering in Canada. A posting abroad is often the zenith of a volunteer’s service and is a tough act to follow.

“I do seek other volunteer commitments, but nothing in Canada provides the same fulfillment. Perhaps it is because while the causes in Canada are legitimate and important, they don’t quite have the same true needs and urgency.”

Figure 9: Importance of different barriers to volunteering



Note: 1 = Not Important; 2 = Somewhat Important; 3 = Quite Important; 4 = Extremely Important.

Conclusions and recommendations

Our research found that Canadians who have served abroad in the developing world are among the most active volunteers in Canada. Nearly two thirds of returned overseas volunteers regularly volunteer in Canada. These findings are consistent with those of Universalia et al. (2005). It is also important to note that returned volunteers not only volunteer at a higher rate than most Canadians, but are also more likely to volunteer for more than one organization.

Like Universalia et al., we found that most returned volunteers have a broadened global outlook and heightened cross-cultural sensitivities, and once they return home they are committed to making their local communities and the global village a more humane place in which to live. For the majority of returned volunteers, the overseas experience helped develop or enhance their skills, and their time abroad has made them more effective volunteers at home. In particular, it is clear that their experience has given many of these volunteers more confidence and interest to engage in leadership, management, and supervisory activities.

The CSGVP found that Canadian volunteers are most likely to serve sports and recreation, social services, education, and religious groups. Although returned volunteers share these interests, they appear to be more attracted to global issues, community development, poverty reduction, and human rights. The experiences and skills they gained or honed overseas make them an ideal pool of prospective volunteers for organizations involved in these issues.

The amount of time that returned volunteers can offer in Canada is largely determined by their life stage and circumstances. Nevertheless, based on our survey and interview data, we offer several recommendations on how best to attract and engage returned Canadian volunteers.

1. Offer opportunities to share skills and experience

Although the primary motivation for involvement of returned volunteers is the belief in a cause, the next most important motivation is the opportunity to share their skills and knowledge. Returned volunteers have expertise and experience, the resourcefulness to use their skill set, and traits that make them highly attractive to Canadian nonprofit organizations and community groups. Moreover, these volunteers are often self-starters, and self-sufficient once a project is underway.

Organizations that want to appeal specifically to returned overseas volunteers should offer opportunities for thoughtful, engaging, and challenging activities. The latter is very important as many returned volunteers are willing to take up volunteer leadership positions.

2. Clarify expectations

For many returned volunteers, the overseas posting was the zenith of their volunteering careers; organizations must compete with this experience. Overseas volunteers have also seen the change that they can make at the grassroots level; conversely, they have seen inertia and failure in communities that can afford neither. As a result, a significant number of returned volunteers who participated in our research said that they are now more selective and careful with their time.

They are particularly selective about the mission and mandate of the organization. Therefore, organizations that hope to take advantage of the energies and abilities of returned volunteers should invest time to clarify their mission and mandate. This will enable volunteers to better determine what they can offer the organization what the organization can offer them.

It is also a good idea to inquire specifically about the overseas experience (e.g., what was learned, what challenges were faced, and what skills are transferable). Most returned volunteers appreciate expressions of interest in their overseas posting.

3. Take advantage of cross-cultural expertise

Most returned volunteers have a well-honed ability to work across cultural as well as geographic borders. Many returned volunteers note an increased level of tolerance and indeed enthusiasm towards other cultures and other ways of seeing the world.

For organizations working in a multicultural milieu or for those that want to move beyond traditional audiences, returned volunteers can help bridge barriers between communities. Although agencies should not call upon these volunteers only if multicultural issues arise, these globalized Canadians are a potentially valuable resource.

4. Develop links with agencies sending volunteers overseas

Canadian nonprofit organizations focusing on issues within Canada would benefit from developing relationships with agencies that send volunteers abroad. This would allow the organizations to raise awareness among overseas volunteers of the volunteer opportunities available on return to Canada. Organizations would also be better able to shape these opportunities to meet the expectations of returning volunteers and so take advantage of their skills and experience.

In conclusion, our research shows that returned overseas volunteers are resourceful and motivated. Through their postings, they have widened their geographical and intellectual horizons and added global issues to their domestic concerns. The international does not supplant the local, however. In fact, most returned volunteers are the embodiment of the adage “think globally, act locally.”

Canadians who have served overseas reported that their postings in the developing world were challenging, frustrating and, for the most part, fulfilling. In the evocative words of one returned volunteer:

“The person who went overseas did not come back. I came back somebody else.”

This “somebody else” is an effective, skilled, and inspired volunteer, ready, willing, and certainly able to serve in Canada’s nonprofit sector.

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