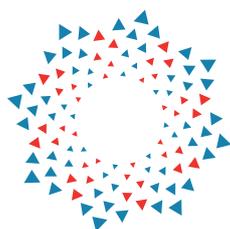


IVCO 2021 THINK PIECE

TO HELL WITH GOOD INTENTIONS

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This is commentary to a famous address by Monsignor Ivan Illich to the Conference on InterAmerican Student Projects in Cuernavaca, Mexico, in 1968.

Illich's mission was the voluntary withdrawal of all North American volunteers from Latin America. The full speech can be read [here](#). It has become a classic text of volunteering self-reflection, as it challenges many common narratives and perceptions, and has even been used in preparation courses for volunteers.

Ivan Illich (1926-2002) was an American priest, writer and public debater, who strongly criticised 'western' economic development models, consistently taking the perspective of the 'third world', as it was called. Younger volunteers may be surprised by his non-compromising language. However, the 1960s was a decade of sharp lines of opposition, divergence and political conflict in many spheres of society, not least in the USA, with growing opposition to the Vietnam War. The political left saw volunteering as an extension of North American public diplomacy, in a negative sense.

Illich criticises two aspects of North American international volunteering in particular, namely the self-image of the volunteer as a do-gooder and the middle class life-style values which the volunteers transmit to the Mexicans, but which at the same time are far out of reach for the host communities. Illich sees the result as utterly negative and imperialistic, stating, "The damage which volunteers do (...) is too high a price for the belated insight that they shouldn't have been volunteers in the first place".

The volunteer's wish to do good and the belief that one is useful for the host community and contributes to its development is pulled thoroughly apart. The do-gooders are primarily seen as being there to build their own images. Illich argues that there is 'a gulf' between how the volunteers and communities feel. He goes on to state, "You will not help anybody with your good intentions. ...The road to hell is paved with good intentions".

The middle class nature of the whole volunteering enterprise is also strongly criticised throughout the speech. "You cannot even meet the majority you pretend to serve..." he asserts. Illich points out the alliance between the North American volunteers and 'a tiny elite' in the host countries that speaks the right language and gives the visitors the feeling of usefulness, even of having sacrificed their time.

Is this still relevant today?

The basic volunteering model which is being criticised is that Global North donor countries send their people to the Global South to teach. This is still an important flow in international volunteering, but it has been modified. Today, even North-based volunteering agencies recruit a growing number of well-educated volunteers in the Global South to go to other countries in the South. A few agencies also facilitate South-to-North volunteering, making it more multi-directional.

Illich's description of the do-gooders' self-image may still be valid for a substantial chunk of Northern volunteers, abroad on an idealistic basis with relevant skills to help the Southern countries reach the SDGs. However, there is solid evidence that for many Northern volunteers, this narrative changes to a more humble one while on service. There is also a growing understanding that the intended effects in the host countries are minimal, and that the most important effects happen through engagement after returning home.

Since Illich's speech, the appearance of social media has provided a number of new platforms to build one's image and display the right attitudes, life choices, and group memberships. As regards the importance for the volunteer of telling others of one's good deeds, Illich is still spot on.

Regarding the middle class aspect of volunteer recruitment, little has changed since Illich's time. Both in the Global North and South, the main recruitment base is people who are well off, often with academic backgrounds and professional careers. Many agencies work explicitly to foster leadership, while people with vocational skills are a minority. With a more modern word, the North agencies and volunteers are in their echo-chambers with the elites of the South.

On the flip side, we can ask if Illich's attack on traditional volunteering is equally valid for South-South and South-to-North volunteering. Would it be relevant to accuse today's Southern volunteers to Norway and other countries of arrogance, ignorance, self-staging and harm-doing to the community? That question is left for you, dear reader, and we end with an optimistic new volunteering narrative 2021:

We are visiting you above all to learn, not to teach. We come from all sections of society. We need your viewpoints to improve at home. And as we speak, people from here are visiting us back home for the same purpose.

A few other selected comments on the piece can be found here:

- Elizabeth Coder, ACPA
- [Phuong Nguyen, Ecuador](#)
- [Omprakash network](#)
- [The Intag Project](#)
- [Stephen Danley, Camden](#)
- [Kathrine Koller, Thinking Beyond Borders](#)
- [Ryan Cooper](#)