

U.S. Aid to Developing Countries Should Support Grassroots Education Programs

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In an era that has already achieved significant progress in minimizing social inequalities across the globe, the United States must now invest foreign aid in nonprofit education programs to support the self-sufficiency of developing countries. Inspired by my previous travel experiences and direct observations of health disparities, I am leading a medical brigade of 30 Rice University students through Global Brigades USA to Nicaragua in May 2015. The second poorest country in the Western hemisphere, Nicaragua can certainly benefit from international aid. However, critics denounce the motivations behind initiatives like mine, and sadly, in an era of “global voluntourism,” (Mohamud 2013)—a movement perpetuated by volunteers’ fulfillment after traveling to developing regions of the world—their skepticism is often justified. Many of these global initiatives organize medical service missions to endow volunteers with personal gratification and reap profits. While medical services can provide short-term assistance, grassroots health education is the primary solution to building sustainable local health systems, with the eventual goal of making statewide progress in good health practices. In light of this perspective, the Rice brigade team will lead educational workshops that address children’s oral hygiene, female reproductive health, and pharmaceutical treatments. Just as medical education can benefit long-term health, science education can cultivate innovative thought and broad-based education in other disciplines can foster the growth of different sectors in developing societies. Thus, U.S. foreign policy should focus investment in bottom-up education programs to promote the ultimate goal of sustainable development, or the ongoing productive management of resources to support societal growth, in countries like Nicaragua.

The industry of “global voluntourism” largely fails to address the root structural impediments toward

sustainable development. Many groups work to mitigate surface indicators of poverty, including disease and income disparity, through temporary or inefficient projects like free health clinics or Western-style banking systems, respectively. It is crucial to re-structure the approach to grassroots aid with the understanding that indigent populations mainly suffer from structural violence (Farmer 2004) or institutionalized inequalities. Structural violence involves oppressive historical, political, economic, and environmental factors that distance these populations from long-term holistic advancements. Although services and infrastructure remedy immediate concerns, education combats critical public health and economic issues at their core. Education increases civilian awareness and empowers communities, ensuring the sustainability of services and infrastructure that were initially provided.

Many pre-existing education initiatives lack cultural sensitivity. The United States consistently allocates foreign aid to build schools, provide school supplies, and train teachers, yet much of this intervention is unsuccessful due to the low quality and relevance of the education that is delivered. For instance, typical primary education programs adopt curricula designed to benefit the average Western student through emphasizing math, science, language, and social studies (Epstein and Yuthas, 2012). While useful, these subjects inadequately prepare students in developing countries for their unique futures, which will likely lie in labor-intensive agricultural work or small enterprises. Organizations that deliver primary education in developing countries should be pressured to construct lesson plans that teach students transferable life skills, like hand-washing, the use of antibiotics, financial literacy, and critical thinking capacities. Instruction in these skills will improve students’ long-term health and economic prospects

in the context of their particular environments. For instance, the World Health Organization (WHO) established the Global School Health Initiative to increase the number of “health-promoting schools” (“Global School Health Initiative”) worldwide. The success of this initiative can be attributed to the WHO’s research of changes in local and national conditions, program self-evaluations, and curriculum adjustments to best suit particular needs of students. This commitment to providing relevant lessons and culturally sensitive support should translate across similar education programs in developing countries.

Grassroots education programs encourage self-sufficiency and foster international partnerships rather than dependencies. Bottom-up initiatives inherently champion democratic citizenship through active civilian participation (Wu and Gong, 2012). Community-based education programs can inspire citizens to set feasible goals and achieve tangible results that directly affect their daily lives. Grassroots education can also encourage social dialogue between citizens and regional authorities. Municipal governments can then be better equipped to advise national governance, so local programs can expand into statewide policies. Ultimately, the sustainability of good practices necessitates self-directed management, which, at first, is more easily facilitated at a small scale.

The biggest challenge associated with establishing bottom-up education programs in developing countries is the lack of funding, particularly that provided by the United States. My numerous disappointing fundraising attempts for educational tools necessary for the medical brigade to Nicaragua lend credence to the financial constraints associated with non-profit programs. In 2013, the U.S. government spent only \$23 billion of its \$3.67 trillion federal budget on humanitarian assistance and international development (Kramer 2013). Even more underwhelming, a major dearth in funding exists for education-based foreign aid programs. Namely, from 2002 to 2004, France, with an economy one-tenth the size of that of the United States, spent \$856 million each year on basic education in developing countries (Kramer 2013). In the same time frame, the United States allocated a

mere \$256 million each year (Education and the Developing World”) due to the U.S. focus of humanitarian assistance on financial and material relief.

While funding for educational development projects should be increased, this funding must also be efficiently distributed. U.S. foreign aid allocation should mirror the microfinance business model, which supports entrepreneurs with great potential through modest loans. Fortunately, many education projects do not demand considerable funding to self-sustain. One example is the African Institute for Mathematical Sciences (AIMS), a non-profit academic institution that accepts students from all over Africa. To date, AIMS has succeeded in graduating 479 well-informed and innovative scientific leaders from 34 African countries (“Progress”) through high-level training in problem formulation, estimation, prioritization, and generally applicable mathematical and computing methods (“AIMS Structured Master’s in Mathematical Sciences”). This center’s establishment only necessitated \$10 million (Siddle, 2009), or 0.04% of the American international aid budget. Thus, the United States can seed small government funds into AIMS-style and similar non-profit education-based ventures to promote active citizen participation and sustainable development across the globe.

The non-profit sector and U.S. government can collaborate to implement bottom-up education projects in medicine, science, and all other disciplines in developing countries. U.S. foreign aid policies should reflect effective altruism (“Effective Altruism”) and enact programs that most efficiently utilize economic capital to bolster the sustainable growth of developing countries. Local education programs effectively address the sources of critical health, economic, and social issues by teaching pertinent life skills. These small-scale projects encourage self-sustaining daily practices and the active contributions of well-informed community members. Starting at a small scale and working upwards, grassroots educational initiatives can combat the lower standard of living in developing countries and work toward national goals of self-sufficiency.

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Author Biography

Jackie Olive -- A native Angeleno, Jackie is a sophomore undergraduate student at Rice University in Houston, TX. A pre-medical student in the Rice University-Baylor College of Medicine Medical Scholars Program, she is double majoring in Biological Sciences and Policy Studies with a focus in Healthcare Management. She is also double minoring in Anthropology and Biochemistry and Cell Biology. Jackie is an undergraduate research intern mentored by Dr. Kirstin Matthews in the Science and Technology Policy Program at Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, and her research focuses are stem cell policy and science policy in the developing world. Her true passion lies in working to combat domestic and international health disparities. In time away from her studies and research, Jackie enjoys traveling, touring prospective students around the Rice campus, singing while playing the piano, and engaging in long conversations with just about anyone.