

FROM SARAWAK TO THE WORLD: SIXTY YEARS OF OVERSEAS VOLUNTEERING IN THE BORNEO STATES

‘A Season in Sarawak’

David Brown is of that generation of Britishers not given to open emotion. Yet even he admits to some moistness of the eyes when he heard of Senator Empiang Jabu’s reflections on their first encounter. “David appeared like a bolt from the blue. Without him I doubt whether we could have passed our Sarawak Junior English exams. For a girl from the Paku in those days, that would have meant going back to the longhouse with little hope of any future away from the farm.” This young Englishman, still in his teens, was the first volunteer of what would later become Voluntary Service Overseas.¹

Only two months previously David Brown had been a prefect at a renowned English public school, prepared to enter Cambridge University with a prestigious place at Jesus College. So how did he come to be teaching a class of Chinese, Iban and Malay students at a ramshackle rural mission school in an obscure corner of the British Empire? The answer lies in the valleys of the Ulu Krian, a hard day’s walk across the watershed from Empiang’s longhouse. Here John Wilson, an ascetic but inspirational Scot previously heading British Borneo’s one teacher training college, had escaped far upriver from Kuching’s introverted colonial society to promote a unique community development scheme.

The aims of ‘Tuan Tuai’, as Wilson was commonly known, were ambitious yet straightforward.² Many of the Dayak peoples of the interior, amongst whom the Iban were the

¹ ‘The first VSO volunteer’, *BBC News Magazine*, 15 May 2008. Empiang became the first Iban girl to attend university and achieved many later distinctions.

² For the Budu story, see Wilson J.K., *Budu*; Dickson M., *Longhouse in Sarawak*; Morrison A., *Fair Land Sarawak*: 108-111; ‘Last of Budu’s Scottish heroes’, *Sunday Post*, 29 August 2010; and ‘The inspirational J.K.Wilson’, *Borneo Post*, 10 March 2013.

most numerous, lived near the edge of subsistence dependent on shifting *swidden* agriculture, jungle foraging and occasionally low-grade commodity production. Even this precarious existence was threatened by the pressures of post-war population growth, the consequent exhaustion of resources and the growing stranglehold of predominantly Chinese economic interests. Government services were rudimentary. The consequences appeared likely to be impoverishment, 'backwardness' and political and economic subjection. The belated introduction of primary education in the rural areas only encouraged the movement of the brightest young people to the towns and the oilfields. Wilson's design was to foster a mode of sustainable rural development that attracted the full commitment of local people, especially the new generation of school students destined to be the community's future leaders.

The Budu community development scheme prospered and expanded to other upriver areas. It included a cooperative shop, a dispensary and at its centre the primary school. In 1957 two Budu students arrived in Nairn, a small, chilly coastal town in the north of Scotland. Denied secondary education in Sarawak due to their school's unregistered status, they were to attend Nairn Academy partly supported by contributions from the Ulu Krian longhouses. Eight other Iban boys followed. All received golden commendations as excellent and companionable students, winning every inter-schools swimming competition and achieving the ultimate accolade of being addressed as 'laddie' by the town's elders.³ Their instant rapport and melding with the youngsters of rural Scotland were particularly noticed. With an enviable Scottish education they returned, as Wilson had intended, to serve the Iban community in "a spirit of chivalry and voluntarism".⁴

³ *Nairnshire Telegraph*, 10 October 1960 and 4 July 1967. Some years later a British military patrol, struggling in the tangled jungle undergrowth of Ulu Entabai, were bemused to be greeted in broad Scots by an irrepressible Iban teacher before being guided to a near-by longhouse.

⁴ Liman ak Numpang, *Journey towards Progress Society*.

Alec and Mora Dickson were intimately concerned with this venture. They were an exceptional couple: Alec, an unconventional colonial administrator, stocky and effervescent with a tireless enthusiasm for the potential of any situation; Mora, tall, angular, immaculately mannered whose natural empathy and virtuosity masked a flinty determination. Alec Dickson was driven by a fervent belief in community development and especially its engagement of young people. He had witnessed their stimulating impact supporting refugees from the 1956 Hungarian uprising, in East African mass literacy campaigns and at the Man O'War Bay youth leadership centre in Nigeria. He was closely involved with International Voluntary Service and UNESCO projects relying on young volunteers.⁵ He was deeply sceptical of community development projects imposed by technical experts and government planners, the relics of which littered the colonial empires. Conventional education provision was equally insidious, draining young people from their rural communities to reinforce elitist social structures. He readily subscribed to Wilson's conviction that sustainable "community and nation building" depended on committed indigenous leadership from the grassroots.⁶ This was seen as an increasingly urgent task in British Borneo as political and economic change encroached on previously isolated groups,

It was just such a youthful leadership that the Dicksons saw at Budu and later at Nairn. They were equally impressed by the vibrant partnership between the Budu students and Wilson's scarcely older European assistants. They had been invited to Sarawak by Murray Dickson, Alec's brother and Director of Education, to study the colony's community development

⁵ See *UNESCO Courier* May 1952. Also influential was the example of the Winant Clayton Volunteers, established by the American Ambassador in London and Tubby Clayton, founder of the TocH charity, for young American volunteers to work in the blitzed East End.

⁶ For an eloquent expression of his vision of community service in an address to the National Union of Students see Dickson A., 'Student community action: thoughts on the deferred year', *Community Development Journal*, October 1970. Some of his views unwittingly presaged the radical 'alternative education' ideologies popular a decade later.

schemes.⁷ They returned to London fired with the possibilities of the contribution young British students could make, not as ‘bosses’ in the traditional colonial style but through their presence and enthusiasm supporting the indigenous community leaders of the future. The moment seemed opportune. There was mounting anxiety over the ‘youth problem’, whether teddy boys, ‘angry young men’ or supposedly unsocialised youngsters following the ending of National Service in the armed forces. Overseas the fear was of educated but unemployed youth drifting to the towns and drawn into nationalist or communist movements. In colonies such as Sarawak and North Borneo there were initiatives for selecting some young people as future leaders but they were limited and self-avowedly elitist. With schemes such as Outward Bound and the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award increasingly popular some form of international youth service appeared a natural way forward.

There were already high-level proposals for a Commonwealth Youth Trust intended to “inculcate a spirit of service amongst educated youth” working in literacy camps and rural welfare. Discussions dribbled into a quagmire of prevaricating bureaucracy.⁸ In the United States proposals by future Vice-President Hubert Humphrey for a federal programme of overseas voluntary service were dismissed as “silly and unworkable”.⁹ Nevertheless Alec Dickson persevered with more modest plans centred on Sarawak. A visit to the Budu boys at Nairn in December 1957 reignited his resolve. Intensive lobbying on the ‘old boy network’ garnered the support of the Bishop of Borneo, Nigel Cornwall, obsessed with the crippling shortage of trained Dayak teachers in rural mission schools. The outcome was a letter to the ‘Sunday Times’ by the Bishop of Portsmouth advocating opportunities of “adventurous service

7 Dickson M., *A Season in Sarawak*. An unusually cerebral colonial official, Murray Dickson was well at ease on the longhouse *ruai* relating tales from Herodotus in workable Iban. Yet he could also denounce as communist indoctrination a heart-felt composition by a twelve-year old Chinese schoolboy about his smallholder family’s hardships. His *Sarawak Anthology* is one of the most attractive evocations of Sarawak’s culture in colonial times.

8 The National Archives (hereafter TNA) CO 859/1032.

9 Humphrey H., *The Education of a Public Man*.

for young people in the underdeveloped territories of the Commonwealth”.¹⁰ In days when flimsy airmail copies of ‘The Times’ reached the remotest colonial outpost there was an enthusiastic response. The Dicksons’ project, aimed primarily at Sarawak’s community development schemes and mission schools, was launched experimentally as ‘The Year Between’.¹¹

‘The tuan with the chungkol’

The first volunteer, David Brown, found himself while still at school clutching a letter with an air ticket to Singapore, advice on vaccinations and instructions to present himself at Heathrow airport three weeks later. The ticket, paid out of the Bishop of Borneo’s own pocket, cost the equivalent of the price of a small house. Subsequent arrangements for volunteer selection and preparation were only slightly less haphazard. Most candidates were recommended and encouraged by their school headmasters. Although basic subsistence allowances were provided by the colonial governments, other financial support came from charitable donations and fund-raising. With a wry sense of British propriety the expenses for one volunteer were paid as a personal contribution by the government minister whose department had refused official funding for the scheme.¹²

At the inception of ‘The Year Between’ scheme in 1958 there were fifteen assignments, four in West Africa and the bulk in Sarawak: principally, the community development schemes at Budu, Long Lama and Padawan and the Anglican mission schools at Betong and Simanggang.

10 ‘The Year Between’, *The Sunday Times*, 23 March 1958; also TNA CO 859/1032. Much in the spirit of the beginnings of overseas voluntary service the Bishop of Portsmouth, Launcelot Fleming, was a former Polar explorer and Outward Bound proponent. Dickson’s lobbying campaign is strangely reminiscent of James Brooke’s similar solicitations of influential prelates and wealthy sympathisers in the face of torpid British officialdom.

11 The abrupt decision to phase out National Service in the armed forces over four years from 1957 left a gap for many school-leavers already accepted for university admission. ‘The Year Between’ was initially regarded as a temporary project.

12 TNA CO 859/1034.

The volunteers themselves have always been quick to disavow any notion that they were embarking on some mission to save the Third World. Yet modest suggestions that they were merely filling in a gap year before university are equally misconceived. In the late 1950s when travel beyond Dover was still an adventure British Borneo, the fabled land of the ‘White Rajahs’, remained remote and difficult of access. Information was scarce and communications uncertain. Travel arrangements were a constant anxiety, often depending on the good will and uncertain schedules of shipping companies and military transport units. Both at home and overseas there was scepticism about the merit and viability of volunteering service for school-leavers in the tropics.¹³ Any misadventure would almost certainly have signalled the failure of the scheme.

As had been expected, conditions were challenging and sometime harsh. Gastric illnesses, tropical ulcers, jungle travelling, elementary living conditions were hardships shared with local people. More difficult were some expatriate reactions to this sudden intrusion of energetic British youth into their hitherto secluded existence.¹⁴ In contrast, attitudes by indigenous communities were universally welcoming: the ‘*tuan* with the *chungkol*’ sharing manual work with his students in equal partnership was novel and frequently revelatory. So also was an evident determination to learn from close contact with Sarawak’s different cultures.¹⁵ By the end of their first year the plaudits received by the British volunteers matched those of the *Budu* boys in Nairn. World-wide interest in the scheme was prompted at UNESCO’s general meeting

13 TNA CO 859/1447.

14 See Dickson A., ‘The Year Between’, *Sunday Times*, 19 April 1959. “Unqualified boys scarcely out of school uniform have little if any contribution to make to the Colony” was a typical comment by Sarawak officials to the Colonial Office: TNA CO 859/1445. It is ironic that precisely fifty years later the conflict between the timorous immobilism of the colonial establishment and volunteers’ impetuous urge for development and activity should be replayed in the shabby pomposity of Sarawak’s expatriate associations. Yet some ‘out-station’ officers such as John Fisher, Resident at Miri, and Desmond Bruen, District Officer in the mid-Rejang, often themselves imbued with the pioneering spirit of the pre-war Rajah’s service and wartime operations, were immensely supportive. North Borneo’s District Liaison Officers were also sympathetic and helpful.

15 ‘Trading places and changing the world’, *The Independent*, 9 December 2008; Edwards E. & Judd F., *Arriving where we Started*.

in December 1958 while a recorded message from Budu, broadcast immediately before the traditional Queen's Speech at Christmas, was heard throughout the Commonwealth. The result was a flood of requests for volunteers to work in a wide range of colonies that included Sarawak and North Borneo. Even more important, the practicality of overseas community service for young people in demanding tropical conditions had been demonstrably established.¹⁶ Sarawak's indigenous hospitality was crucial to this success.

In the following year sixty volunteers embarked for destinations as diverse as Labrador, British Honduras and the Solomon Islands. The first arrived in North Borneo, principally as support for youth clubs and primary schools, reflecting a belief by expatriate officials in the British Borneo territories that introduction to 'healthy British values' would help break down the dangerously inward-looking tendencies of Chinese youth.¹⁷ The growing need for English language teachers of 'transition' classes as part of the enforced conversion of Chinese-medium education prompted previously resistant colonial governments to make appointments to government secondary and Chinese middle schools. Recruitment quickly broadened to include industrial apprentices, police cadets and female volunteers working with local counterparts in places as varied as a Padungan garage and the Tarat agricultural station.¹⁸ Two school-leavers joined the newly established Lemanak community development scheme. Glowing appreciations of the volunteers' impact continued to accumulate. Yet numbers remained small. The organisation of the rapidly burgeoning scheme depended on the Dicksons working from their kitchen table in Acacia House, occasionally interrupted by cheers from the adjacent

16 It might be said that the ability to work together with the extraordinary leaders of Sarawak's community development schemes, the "atheistic saint" John Wilson and his equally driven missionary counterparts Archdeacon Peter Howes and 'Tuan Sapu' Hudson Southwell, was just as impressive an achievement. See Howes P.H.H., *In a Fair Ground*, and Southwell C.H., *Uncharted Waters*.

17 For example, Morris S., *Borneo Bound*.

18 It was paradoxical that the elite British school system which the Dicksons criticised for its malign replication in the colonies produced so many of the first volunteers. Attempts were made from the outset to redress the balance.

towpath as the Oxford and Cambridge boat race crews sped past. Frequently erratic postings, communication by sixpenny aerogramme and uncertain accounting began to tell.

A move to a corner desk at the Royal Commonwealth Society in central London indicated increasing official interest, particularly in the form of government funding. It also meant growing bureaucratic involvement. The British Council took on responsibility for in-country representation including project selection and oversight. Recruitment pamphlets were produced, illustrated with “dusky children in classrooms and young British people, stripped to their shorts, planting pepper and digging fishponds in the tropical sun”. Returned volunteers met the Queen at Buckingham Palace. Yet what was now known as Voluntary Service Overseas was still a homely affair. Volunteers’ reports from Simanggang or Tenom might appear in rural parish magazines while headteachers in Solihull and Inverness watched over their former charges’ progress in Borneo. Despite mounting demands for graduate volunteers the Dicksons insisted on maintaining youthfulness and community partnership as the core attributes of the scheme.

It was in this spirit of *manaakitanga* that in January 1962 the first New Zealand volunteers arrived in Kuching.¹⁹ The headmasters of the two premier schools in Christchurch had close contacts through the Headmasters’ Conference with British counterparts, the most enthusiastic supporters of Voluntary Service Overseas. In the same year that Outward Bound was established in New Zealand it was agreed that two Christchurch school-leavers should join the overseas volunteering programme in Sarawak, building on an already substantial Colombo Plan presence. As with the pioneer British volunteers, organisation was rushed but enthusiasm, shared by New Zealand’s new Prime Minister, was immediate. With government funding postings were approved to the Lemanak community development scheme and Kanowit

¹⁹ ‘First student volunteers from New Zealand’, *Sarawak Tribune* 19 January 1962.

government secondary school.²⁰ Further Kiwi volunteers, often with a sturdy farming background, would make a notable contribution to rural education and community development in the Borneo territories. The New Zealand scheme, soon established as Volunteer Service Abroad, was to be the longest-lived overseas volunteer programme in Sarawak. It also held closest to the Dicksons' original concept of 'adventurous service' for young people in partnership with overseas communities.²¹ A similar but attenuated initiative, organised even more informally with VSO support by the Royal Commonwealth Society Western Australia, sent two Australian volunteers to Labuan and Segama.²²

Plugging the 'development gap'

By the early 1960s the outside world was trespassing on the hitherto isolated British Borneo territories at an even faster pace than foreseen in the initial conception of overseas volunteering at Budu. Proposals for Greater Malaysia were announced, making it certain that unanticipated political change was imminent. Organised political parties made their appearance articulating long suppressed concerns over the lack of development in the Borneo states, exacerbated by growing youth unemployment and lack of local technical expertise. One of the first acts of Sarawak's incoming governor in 1960 was to publish a White Paper, 'Subversion in Sarawak', purporting to show how such a 'development gap' would be exploited by militant Chinese

20 The Lemanak scheme was intended to guide traditional Iban communities in the Ulu Lemanak from diehard dependence on migratory *pindah* to a more settled and productive way of life. Erik Jensen, when asked to undertake the project, recruited a handful of young progressive Ibans to help work with the local people. They were joined by VSO, VSA and later Peace Corps volunteers in a remarkable partnership that after three years achieved unexpected success. See Jensen E., *Where Hornbills Fly*; also Reese R., 'Birth in an Iban longhouse', *Peace Corps Volunteer* July 1963: 17, by a Peace Corps community nurse at Lemanak coping with customary Iban *adat* at childbirth. Kanowit government secondary school had its origins in an earlier, unsuccessful community development scheme by the Sarawak government.

21 Peat N., *The VSA Way: 25 Years of Volunteering Overseas*.

22 TNA FCO 141/12311; personal communication from Erland Happ, 6 September 2017.

communism.²³ Partly fabricated in order to secure external financial support, this threat echoed the wider ideological themes of the Cold War in which decolonisation and ‘underdevelopment’ might provoke subversion of the democratic world order. Economic orthodoxy looked for a solution in rapid assisted growth towards development ‘take-off’, reflected in proliferating government aid programmes and the 1961 United Nations Development Decade.

In British Borneo there was a noticeable spurt in development spending on much-needed infrastructure including roads, transportation facilities, schools, hospitals and government quarters. Funding and technical assistance through the Colombo Plan were central to this effort at a time when British experience and expertise were diminishing with limited resources concentrated on the African colonies. An insatiable demand for ‘experts’, one of the most significant drags on colonial development programmes, could only be met by graduates and this was reflected in the composition of the expanding overseas volunteer programmes. Above all, rapid expansion of the secondary school system and the English-medium education provision that was considered crucial for development depended on teachers. Yet adequately trained local teachers were in desperately short supply. Colombo Plan appointments, contract teachers and the indispensable staff recruited from South India were insufficient. Overseas volunteer school-leavers had already proved their ability to teach at the appropriate level, if only in contingency. The drafting of graduate volunteers from overseas until the time that local counterparts could take over was a natural next step.

In recognition of this new reality the first two Canadian graduate volunteers were posted to Sarawak schools in August 1961. Canadian University Service Overseas had been launched just two months previously as a privately funded non-governmental organisation stemming

23 See Phillips D.J., ‘The migrated archives: the underbelly of colonial rule in Borneo’, *Borneo Research Bulletin* 2014. Also *Hansard House of Commons debates*, 6 November 1961, in which British parliamentarians condemned the dire development situation left by a decade of colonial rule.

from earlier initiatives at Canada's premier universities. It was designed to provide graduate support in the developing countries comparable to long-standing Australian volunteer assistance in Indonesia.²⁴ A handful of "fine young Canadians" were assigned on an experimental basis to projects in India, Ceylon and Sarawak. Just as the New Zealand volunteers, they could rely on a significant Canadian presence already established in British Borneo through the Colombo Plan. Their initial postings to secondary schools in Kuching and Miri reflected those circumstances. Although the total number of all overseas volunteers remained small their presence at a time when Chinese schoolteachers were being 'blackmarked' could attract political criticism.²⁵ Nevertheless, the pattern for the future had been set.

It is unclear whether Presidential candidate John Kennedy's inspiring speech on overseas community service at Michigan University in October 1960 and the subsequent establishment of the Peace Corps hurried other volunteer programmes along the road to graduate recruitment. In a way it is immaterial since Kennedy brilliantly encapsulated the ambitious spirit of the times and many contemporary influences played on each other.²⁶ Alec Dickson's experience and the Outward Bound concept had leverage in Washington while London, Wellington and Ottawa regarded with awe and some envy the dynamism of the American approach.²⁷ There were demonstrable similarities: the same drive for 'liberal developmentalism'; the emphasis on 'citizen diplomacy', especially in fostering contacts with future community leaders in the developing countries; the importance given to the progressive role of volunteers on return to their own societies; and the impulse to expunge the 'Ugly American' image of the 1950s as

24 See Brouwer J.C., *Canada's Global Villagers* and Smillie I., *The Land of Lost Content*.

25 Tan Chong Meng, *Council Negeri debates* 1961.

26 See Sobocinska A., 'How to win friends and influence nations: the history of international volunteering', *Journal of Global History* March 2017 for a forensic dissection of misconceived claims to precedence. The long history of international volunteering, free of petty nationalism, is recounted in Gillette A., *One Million Volunteers*.

27 TNA DO 163/22.

much as the colonialist taint in the British case.²⁸ Yet nothing could disguise a greater American belief in the power to impose modernising ideas and technologies on the ‘New Frontier’ nor the purpose provided by a formal constitutional mandate that was manifestly an extension of American global ‘soft power’.

The initial Peace Corps programme focussed on Africa and Latin America. The British Borneo territories, relatively secure from possible Soviet influence, had a low priority.²⁹ Yet the new prospect of substantial unanticipated assistance from this quarter placed the colonial administrations in a quandary. There had long been fears of the extension of American influence in the region, bolstered by a petty anti-Americanism endemic in a certain type of colonial official.³⁰ Nevertheless, it had to be accepted that as authority, prestige and resources drained from the colonial regimes the time for exclusiveness had passed. Influential Peace Corps leaders could not be antagonised when American support was needed in promoting the concept of Malaysia.³¹ Apparently untrammelled technical assistance together with an impressive accompaniment of support staff and logistical back-up were an unmissable opportunity when suddenly accelerating local expectations and political demands were exposing the inadequacy of previous development efforts. The advantages of the Peace Corps’ ability to respond at speed to requests for “college-trained manpower” across a wide range of skills were apparent as soon as colonial governments drew up their shopping lists for agriculturalists, nurses, teachers and even radio engineers and labour statisticians.

28 Toynbee A, *New York Times Magazine*.

29 This did not prevent a highly secretive CIA mission in October 1961 intended to make contact with radical left-wing Chinese groups outside Kuching to ascertain their political ideology and militancy: TNA FCO 141/12627. Also see Koerten J., ‘Anti-communism and idealism: the Peace Corps and US foreign policy in the Third World 1960-1966’, University of Wisconsin, 2009.

30 For example, the hilarious discussions amongst colonial officials on proposals to site a ‘Voice of America’ transmitting station in Sarawak had it been ejected by a nationalist government in the Philippines: TNA FCO 141/12760.

31 TNA CO 1030/1377. There were many times up to the last days of British rule when an exasperated Prime Minister Harold Macmillan was compelled to ride roughshod over colonial officials in Borneo.

The first group of Peace Corps volunteers arrived at Kuching airport in August 1962. A larger assemblage followed in North Borneo.³² There was a marked contrast in the publicity embellishing these occasions with the virtual smuggling of the first British volunteers into Sarawak four years earlier. Colonial officials were impressed by the dedication to hard work inculcated in Peace Corps training while expressing astonishment at such novel facets of modernity as psychological testing in selection.³³ Concerns over conflicts between British and American systems, especially in English teaching and medical procedures, proved largely misplaced. Significantly, introduction of the 4H Club programme received immediate priority. As the essence of New Frontier pioneering it was claimed to be “the most exciting field of Peace Corps endeavor”.³⁴ Volunteers working on this type of agricultural extension had a visible impact.³⁵ Intended to encourage youths of primary level education to remain in the rural areas and improve agricultural methods, it complemented similar efforts by the colonial government but was invariably conducted with greater public verve and resources. It also marked a profound difference in approach from the community development projects in which British and New Zealand volunteers were engaged.

As with the other volunteer programmes the main orientation of Peace Corps efforts quickly turned to graduate secondary school teaching and primary school support. From a relatively small group of teachers working at eighteen schools in 1962, most of whom were VSO school-leavers, the total volunteer numbers rose exponentially in the following years. This was partly a response to the insistent needs of a rapidly expanding secondary school system. It also reflected the closer association of the volunteer programmes with burgeoning overseas

32 See Allison T.H., El Chan & Grantham A.J., ‘Early history of the Peace Corps in North Borneo (Sabah)’, *Borneo Research Bulletin* 2012 43:88-97; also Baer A., ‘The Peace Corps in Malaysian Borneo’, *Borneo Research Bulletin* 2012 43: 86-87.

33 Morrison A. *Fair Land Sarawak*.

34 Carter G. ‘The beginnings of Peace Corps programming’, *Annals of the American Political & Science Association*, May 1966, 365: 52.

35 ‘The Americans have landed’, *Sarawakiana* 4 July 2008.

technical assistance spending by home country governments.³⁶ The local sustainability of the programmes could rely on relatively robust official institutions and the prior contribution of the Colombo Plan. In consequence, by the mid-1960s American, British, Canadian and New Zealand volunteers were an established presence in virtually every *pasar* of the Borneo territories. They were also involved in an impressive diversity of initiatives ranging from the community development schemes now taking on British industrial apprentices as well as New Zealand cadets to assistance with adult literacy, orangutan rehabilitation projects and work in youth clubs and prisons. If at times the “hectic and chaotic early years” were all too apparent there can be no doubting the vigour and drive of the volunteer contribution.³⁷

‘An aerogramme from Sir Ed’

There can have been few volunteers who did not feel a twinge of anticipation as their Fokker Friendship, bucking in turbulence over the South China Sea, prepared for the descent to Kuching or Jesselton. It may have been the sight of apparently endless forest broken only by the loops of muddy meandering rivers or a glimpse of magical Kinabalu through the clouds. It may have been the lingering images of imaginative publicity in which “volunteers penetrate far into the jungle by longboat where the once fierce Ibans live in longhouses festooned with human skulls, grisly war prizes taken within living memory.”³⁸ The mid-1960s in the Borneo states were indeed exciting times, typified more by ubiquitous mud-encrusted bulldozers than marauding Dayak war parties. There was a feeling of a society on the move, especially with so many school students from previously remote rural areas moving into secondary education.

36 Ideologically-driven academic arguments that organisations such as Voluntary Service Overseas were manifestations of British end of empire angst would be more compelling if conversant with the facts: for example, Bailkin J., ‘Decolonizing emotions: the management of feeling in the new world order’ in Biess F. & Gross D.M., *Science and Emotions after 1945*. Nevertheless, few national overseas volunteer programmes from the 1960s could escape the Faustian dilemmas attendant on receipt of government funding.

37 Textor R.B., *Cultural Frontiers of the Peace Corps*; also Adams M., *VSO: the Story of the First Ten Years*.

38 ‘Sabah and Sarawak’, *Peace Corps Volunteer*, December 1963: 10.

The prospect of Malaysia held out promise of a nation-building enterprise in which most volunteers were keen to participate. Yet it was also a period of turbulence as newly formed political groups clashed over the future of their communities, *Konfrontasi* threatened on the border and social tradition came under growing strain.

Whether from Chicago, Canterbury or Vancouver and despite great differences in background, motivation and organisation volunteers found that they shared much in common. Preparations were variable: the Americans endured the rigours of Outward Bound training, softened slightly by their own model Borneo longhouse; the British had instruction in digging slit-trench latrines, Scottish dancing and advice to search out Iban-English dictionaries in the second-hand bookshops of London's Charing Cross Road. Postings could be switched at short notice. Project roles might be ill-defined, a "Borneo version of the All-American Organization Man".³⁹ Adaptation was eased both by the openness of Borneo society and a novel expatriate presence of Colombo Plan professionals, contract workers and Commonwealth troops far removed from the traditional colonial enclaves. 'Repatriations' were few.⁴⁰ Misadventures in the turmoil of the 1962 Brunei Rebellion that might have hamstrung the Peace Corps programme at its outset were concealed in diplomatic silence. Living conditions were generally reasonable despite frequent gastric troubles. Dank Chinese shophouses, swiftly responding to new demands, disgorged powdered milk, Jell-O and Japanese battery tape-recorders for sending messages home. The blue aerogramme in return from family, friends or solicitous dignitaries was always an eagerly anticipated event, an unannounced drop-in by Peace Corps director Sargent Shriver perhaps less so.⁴¹

39 'The volunteer image', *Peace Corps Volunteer*, February 1963: 4.

40 Conversely the impact of 'reverse culture shock', both creative and destructive, has been little described and much underestimated.

41 'An aerogramme from Sir Ed', *VSA Connect*, 30 November 2016.

Although some postings such as physiotherapy and engineering demanded professional specialisation, the mid-1960s were the heyday of the 'BA generalist' as the school-leaver 'cadet' programmes diminished in prominence. Effusive 'National Geographic' publicity belied the routine nature of mending hen coops, organising youth club committees and marking school exercises on late sweaty nights. Most East Malaysian secondary schools now depended on an expatriate majority of teaching staff, whether the volunteer and Colombo Plan cadres or the invaluable teachers from Kerala.⁴² For volunteer teachers most direct contact with the local community came through their students.⁴³ The prevalence of tapeworm and intestinal ailments, problems with school fees and the desperate importance of examination results told their own story. While volunteers could join with their students in a new global consumerism of pop tunes and 'stylish' accoutrements, they could not remain unaware of the strength of loyalty to indigenous community cultures. Many volunteers made a determined effort to learn from the rich diversity of those cultures, if only the desecration of causing 'loss of face' or the refreshingly democratic nature of many Dayak societies. Sharing the same conditions as local people encouraged partnership and confidence un beholden to the colonial elitism of the urban centres.

The opportunity of unfamiliar expatriate contacts was equally memorable: the initiation of British and New Zealand volunteers into happily domestic Thanksgiving Day celebrations matched the more raucous welcome given to 'Peace Corps wallahs' over endless rounds of Tiger beer. The declining European haunts so acidly portrayed by Somerset Maugham and Paul Theroux were usually avoided.⁴⁴ Small-minded colonialist gossips in Kuching and Miri might demean the occasional appearance of unkempt volunteers surrounded by boisterous 'natives'

42 Eaton P., *Borneo and Beyond: 72-76*, gives a good impression of the diversity of the 'staffroom community'. Also 'To our dear teacher Master Paul', *The Star*, 4 October 2012 and 'Teachers – quality or quantity?', *Borneo Post* 18 January 2015.

43 See 'Life changing years', *Borneo Post*, 11 November 2012.

44 For contrasting approaches, see Shirra G.S., *The Accidental Prawn* and Wilson H., *The Year of the Hornbill*. The Peace Corps specifically discouraged excessive expatriate fraternisation.

from the outstations but they were readily dismissed. Less easy to ignore were the frenetic politics of the time. Many volunteers were glad to witness the school parades, the makeshift ceremonies and the raising of the new Malaysian flag that marked 'Merdeka'. Even during *Konfrontasi* it was usually only an infrequent police checkpoint on the roads and rumours of mysterious *penyamun* that impinged on daily life.⁴⁵ Political discourse, like much else, lay below the surface, impervious to even the most acculturated volunteer. Sometimes the throes of community turmoil hit direct: the promising student suddenly disappearing to "go inside", returning years later upon 're-joining society'; or volunteers redeployed from 'hot areas' because of fear of "political troubles". More menacing was Vietnam, a constant low rolling thunder across the South China Sea.

The relative immunity of volunteers from militant harassment in contrast to many other countries was demonstrated by their sometimes remote and isolated postings. Locations far upriver in lonely settlements such as Sangan, Tabut, Tongud and Tulai could be far from the reach of government.⁴⁶ Agricultural extension work reached to the Kalimantan border and local political loyalties could not always be taken for granted. Hazardous travelling by longboat or 'jungle-slogging' for days through rivers and across hills became routine. Community nurses, primary education supervisors and surveyors working under similar conditions were an indispensable complement to accelerating rural development efforts. Closer to the urban centres most volunteers were engaged on projects focussed on the needs of the rural areas: agricultural training and the establishment of agricultural stations, the development of rural trades and services to rural schools and the crucial schools broadcasting service at a time when the transistor radio was reaching previously distant communities. In the towns support was

⁴⁵ Even so, some volunteers in areas close to the border such as Bau, Lundu and Tawau could not escape the deadly effects of 'undeclared war' at the height of *Konfrontasi*. Equally undeclared were Peace Corps casualties during the 1962 Brunei Rebellion.

⁴⁶ See, for example, 'Voluntary service in Sarawak', *Borneo Post*, 15 July 2012.

provided for social welfare needs previously neglected by the colonial governments such as youth welfare and probation and care for the disabled. Consciously or not, all these efforts contributed to the ‘hearts and minds’ nation-building campaign that was building support for Malaysia.

At its peak the number of volunteers from all the volunteer programmes in East Malaysia and Brunei was no more than around three hundred in a year.⁴⁷ Yet with a sparse population and scattered settlements three hundred enthusiastic activists embedded in local society could have a potent impact. Some early British volunteers might protest at the dominant image of the Peace Corps but local people had no reason to differentiate and the ‘Canadian Peace Corps’ equalled the genuine article from Boston or Peoria. At home there could be some over-exuberant emblazoning of volunteer achievements: newspaper features such as ‘Boy explorer discovers central Borneo’ were equally amusing and embarrassing.⁴⁸ Within the Borneo states impressions were and remain almost universally favourable. What of the enduring memories of the volunteers themselves? The shock of sharing a diminutive rural aircraft with a cabin-load of preening fighting cocks?⁴⁹ The sight of the 1963 United Nations mission fleeing their hotel restaurant in anticipation of a detonating flambé?⁵⁰ Squatting in a draughty mountain-side *bilek* before dawn to gulp down scalding rice and *babi but*? Regardless of ‘citizen diplomacy’ and ‘partnered development’ it was the friendships so eloquently described by Mora Dickson as the core of the overseas volunteering concept that truly counted. In this spirit

47 The volunteer presence in Brunei was always polyglot and limited, attracting little official support or interest.

48 *Corby News*, 21 February 1962, elaborating on the holiday excursions of a VSO cadet volunteer at Long Lama. ‘Ambassadors of good will: the Peace Corps’, *National Geographic*, September 1964, has a special place in the pantheon of laudatory publicity. Yet there is an argument that such positive exposure of volunteer activities did much to encourage initial public support for overseas aid and development programmes: Sobocinska A., ‘Beautiful humanitarians’, Trevor Reese Memorial Lecture 2017.

49 Breen M.J, ‘The far country’, *Cha – an Asian Literary Journal*, March 2014.

50 De Danaan, L., *Katie Gale*.

the students of St Margaret's School Seria could say of their New Zealand teachers, "They were the first Europeans to treat us like people".⁵¹

'Malaysianisation' and specialisation

The withdrawal of British troops from East Malaysia following the termination of *Konfrontasi* and intensifying 'Malaysianisation' marked a significant change of environment for the volunteer programmes. The enthusiastic ambition of the earlier 1960s was replaced by a more sombre mood. Declining global commodity prices, dependence on exploitative timber concessions and a stultifying communist insurgency slowed the pace of development. Despite the introduction of state-driven rural development programmes displacing the colonial community development schemes many rural areas suffered political neglect and increasing impoverishment. Volunteers themselves were beginning to question not only the developmental value of their projects but the whole concept of 'liberal developmentalism' as attention shifted to the fundamental issue of the imbalance in 'North-South' relations.⁵² The inspiration of John Kennedy's Michigan speech was tarnished by Vietnam and Cold War ideology as more young people looked for solutions not in community service but political action. Within Malaysia itself growing impatience with the inadequacies of conventional political and economic development was reflected in responses to the *Peristiwa 13 Mei*, introduction of the New Economic Policy and moves to expunge allegedly alien influences.

The first volunteer programme in the Borneo states, Voluntary Service Overseas, had already fallen foul of these changed circumstances. Continuing British dominance in East Malaysia during 'Confrontation' had exacerbated resentment in political quarters sympathetic to Malay

51 Dickson M., *A World Elsewhere*: 205-217; 'Kiwi volunteers reap 50-year reward', *VSA Connect*, 5 April 2017.

52 See, for example, Cayley D., 'The earth not an ecosystem', 9 April 2017.

nationalism. The 1967 sterling devaluation with accompanying cuts to promised aid shattered the remnants of British prestige. The spiteful expulsion of the remaining British colonial officers in Sarawak on the pretext of political intrigue extended to the “redeployment” of the British volunteer programme: no British volunteers were recruited for Sarawak from 1967 and appointments in Sabah were severely curtailed. A similar fate for the Peace Corps programme was predicted in bazaar chatter. This followed seven years later. With the advent of state governments determined to tighten control in every aspect of political and social life the ‘imperium in imperio’ of the Peace Corps became increasingly irksome. The patent uneasiness of many volunteers witnessing the impact of mounting discrimination, their sometimes free-wheeling ‘Easy Rider’ attitudes and their access to the rural areas, the scene of often brutal counter-insurgency operations, were equally unwelcome.⁵³ The unexplained expulsion of a renowned ‘New York Times’ journalist in 1970 was succeeded, despite an unusual flurry of diplomatic activity, by increasing bureaucratic obstructionism and the progressive rundown of Peace Corps appointments.⁵⁴

Whether the ‘neo-colonialist’ taint of the two major volunteer programmes provided an opening for incoming Australian volunteers is debatable. The state governments of the time were more concerned with reversing previous administrations’ resistance to the entry of *semanjung* teachers, a policy which the expatriate volunteer presence may have unwittingly assisted. In the late 1960s Australian Volunteers Abroad, formally established in 1963 but with much earlier antecedents, were extending their reach beyond long-standing areas of

53 Not only the Peace Corps: see Knowland R., *To Hell with Smack*.

54 The contention in Baer A.S., ‘People to People: the Peace Corps in Sarawak’, Oregon State University, 2012 that termination of the Peace Corps programme was due to the personal animus of Sarawak’s State Secretary is unlikely. There were, nevertheless, widely circulated rumours in the early 1970s that Peace Corps personnel might be ‘spies’ (personal information from ASP C.Howell, 20 June 1972), possibly aggravated by the flat-footed operations of the CIA post established in 1970 after many previous forays under cover of the American consulate in Kuching. Most volunteers were unaware of the toxic and extensive nature of the government informers’ network inherited from previous colonial regimes, always eager to magnify any indiscretion overheard in coffee-shop or open market. Public statements by individual Peace Corps members alleged to be sympathetic to the Vietnamese communist movement did not help (Repositori Rekod Negeri Sarawak (hereafter RRNS) SUPS/T/381/1).

concentration in Indonesia, the Pacific islands and the African ‘front-line’ states. With the British ‘East of Suez’ evacuation and the Vietnam debacle Australian foreign policy was geared to foster good relations in Southeast Asia. The end of *Konfrontasi* eased the introduction of an Australian volunteer programme in East Malaysia without the risk of malignant repercussions elsewhere in the region. With little fanfare on arrival in 1967 the relatively small numbers of AVA volunteers could build on the favourable legacy left by the contribution of Australian troops and Colombo Plan experts to the development of local social and physical infrastructure.⁵⁵ Against the visible evidence of Australian-constructed roads and bailey bridges throughout East Malaysia it is unsurprising that the first AVA volunteer’s assignment was an arduous road construction project in the Crocker Range.

The Australian volunteers of the mid-1970s and Canadian counterparts were mostly graduates on two-year service contracts supported by some in-country training and *Bahasa* instruction.⁵⁶ They tended to be concentrated on larger institutions such as urban hospitals, government departments, teacher training colleges and well-established secondary schools. Outside the main towns the volunteer presence was diminished although imaginative ventures such as mobile theatre troupes and community public health projects reached the countryside. As development and expectations in East Malaysia gathered pace, more focussed demands for expert skills and experience were reflected in AVA specialists engaged in agricultural sciences and livestock breeding, CUSO cooperants working on forestry and conservation schemes and a small number of German volunteers working as an off-shoot of the well-established DED programme in Malaya⁵⁷. The first AVA groups included surveyors, geologists, dieticians, physiotherapists, soil scientists and teacher trainers but comparatively few teachers, the staple

⁵⁵ ‘Volunteers to serve abroad’, *Canberra Times*, 19 December 1967.

⁵⁶ See Overseas Service Bureau, *Australian Volunteers Abroad*; also Verso G., *Blackboard in Borneo*.

⁵⁷ For the background to the Deutsche Entwicklungsdienst, self-consciously modelled on the Peace Corps but in practice more of a technical assistance agency, see Haase I, *Zwischen Lenkung und Selbstbestimmung*.

of previous volunteer programmes. The Commonwealth volunteer presence was noteworthy in the growing parastatal sector with a new sense of federal and state government direction in the promotion of state farms, resettlement schemes and farming development. The balance soon changed: for a brief period the only overseas volunteer teachers in Sarawak were Canadians, Australians and New Zealanders. In Sabah, by contrast, institutions such as Gaya Teacher Training College retained a vibrant international community representing every volunteer programme and intermingling with local trainees.

A resuscitated Voluntary Services Overseas programme followed these trends. Its re-introduction in 1975 may have seemed anomalous when the need for such technical assistance in Malaysia was already being questioned. The decision owed much to the influence and character of Malcolm MacDonald, formerly Commissioner-General for South-east Asia and keenly interested in the Borneo origins of the British volunteer programme, a masterly political choreographer for whom the coming 20th anniversary celebrations of Voluntary Service Overseas were unthinkable without a VSO presence in Sarawak. He was also preoccupied with the restoration of British 'soft power' in the region after the humiliating withdrawal of the late-1960s.⁵⁸ Two dentists and a forest botanist consequently joined a tight-knit group of British teachers bound for Kuching. Within four years this tentative opening had expanded to some fifty volunteers with a wide range of specialists from welding instructors to entomologists and teaching staff at most major secondary schools in East Malaysia, including 'reconstituted' schools formerly notorious for political militancy.⁵⁹ It is indicative of the new flexibility

58 Malcolm MacDonald papers at Durham University GB-0033-MAC 78/1/25-36. Also see MacDonald M., *Borneo People*. MacDonald was president of the Royal Commonwealth Society and Voluntary Service Overseas. He shared many of the traits of Alec Dickson, VSO's founder, including a cursory approach to pompous or dilatory colonial officers although his charm and position were notoriously attractive to their wives.

59 Fears of the political repercussions of drastically declining standards of English, maths and science teaching also contributed to the decision to end the 'ban' on VSO volunteers: TNA BW 104/20; RRNS SUPS/T/1388/JD1. In contrast to the cadets and 'graduate generalists' of the 1960s, most volunteers were already engaged in public service occupations; the increasing technical assistance nature of the volunteer programmes was reflected in their local oversight by a state-level Technical Assistance Coordinating Committee.

afforded by such numbers on longer-term service agreements that it was VSO volunteers in Sarawak who provided the initial emergency support requested in 1979 for the Vietnamese 'boat people' refugee camps.⁶⁰

International development in the 1980s saw a dramatic shift in focus, typified by the work of the Brundtland Commission and the concern of its 1987 report, 'Our Common Future', with environmental and social sustainability. Overseas volunteer programmes, increasingly responding to the policy priorities of their national aid agencies, reflected this new emphasis in project selection and collaboration with local non-governmental organisations. Nowhere was this more apposite than in East Malaysia where increasing urban prosperity fuelled by extractive exploitation of natural resources was exposing both the environmental impact of rampant development and the exclusion from its benefits of marginalised social groups. A striking example of this new approach was the Seri Mengasih developmental centre for disabled people, established by the Sabah Mental Health Association with CUSO leadership and specialist involvement from other overseas volunteer programmes. Support for the Cheshire Homes in Kota Kinabalu and Kuching renewed an association with such charitable organisations that stretched to the earliest days of the overseas volunteer movement. An equal contribution was made to the development of East Malaysia's expanding national parks and conservation education. Even where projects proved of limited sustainability it was collaboration with local counterparts and support for local voluntary initiatives such as women's groups that had lasting benefits.

Full circle

⁶⁰ Eggers P., *Saviors*, by a former Peace Corps volunteer in Malaysia gives a highly fanciful account of the later Peace Corps involvement in the camps.

In 1991 the Voluntary Service Overseas office in Kuching closed, marking the end of an association with the Borneo states lasting well over thirty years.⁶¹ The Peace Corps programmes in Sabah and West Malaysia had terminated eight years previously. By the late 1980s other overseas volunteer organisations had concluded that many volunteer posts in Malaysia were not in any sense ‘developmental’: such essentially technical assistance appointments could be readily filled by trained and qualified local people or by the unobtrusive but increasing numbers of Japanese Overseas Cooperation Volunteers. Although the expert contribution of overseas volunteers such as AVA teachers in Sarawak secondary schools, VSA special needs specialists and VSO English language teaching trainers in Sabah’s Rural Primary English Programme was still valuable it was clearly not irreplaceable. Simultaneously the global repercussions of the end of the Cold War were refocussing the attention of aid agencies on areas of higher development priority such as the former Soviet bloc, Indo-China and southern Africa. It is ironic in view of its original motivation that the last manifestation of overseas volunteering in Borneo through Voluntary Service Overseas should have been a British Executive Service Overseas mission to support elite private schools in Kuching.

Has the long tradition of overseas volunteering in East Malaysia found a natural successor in the multiplicity of ‘voluntourism’ schemes attracting young people to engage in worthy causes such as environmental conservation and community welfare? Some well-advertised inducements recall the strident volunteer recruitment publicity of the 1960s: “an unrivalled cultural experience helping communities in this land of tribal warriors, mysterious head-hunters and intriguing adventurers”.⁶² ‘Alternative volunteering’ has been encouraged by the new millennium of cheap air travel, emotive altruism and competition in the graduate jobs market. The best projects contain features of the overseas volunteering programmes of the past:

61 See Bird D., *Never the Same Again*.

62 Camps International Borneo school expeditions 2018.

the desire for ‘adventurous service’; the commitment to developing international partnership with vulnerable communities and a greater understanding of those communities; the instinct for friendship at the core of the original volunteering concept; and, for not a few participants, the ‘life-changing experience’.⁶³ Yet of their nature ‘voluntourism’ schemes are unlikely to make a significant contribution to community development without the institutional framework on which traditional volunteer programmes could rely. At their worst they may promote debilitating dependency and social corrosion.

A significant innovation has been the initiation of volunteering schemes on a regional basis. Thus Yayasan Sukarelawan Sisma-ASEAN student volunteer missions with representative ‘global volunteer leaders’ from West Malaysia, Brunei and Cambodia have worked on community projects at Kabong, Song and Tawau, focussing on family malnutrition and inadequate public health provision.⁶⁴ Korean volunteers under the auspices of International ICT Volunteers have promoted ICT skills at Melalap in partnership with the local community.⁶⁵ Whether such state-sponsored and closely controlled ‘voluntourism’ is an ersatz surrogate for effective development may be debated. There can, however, be no questioning the contribution of Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers. Established in 1965 on the model of the Peace Corps but more firmly integrated within official technical assistance programmes it is only recently that the JOCV presence to East Malaysia has become more apparent as other volunteer programmes have withdrawn. Volunteers have tended to be highly qualified and, especially in the case of ‘senior volunteers’, experienced experts. For the most part attached to state government departments they have been engaged on rural development and environmental

63 It is legitimate to mention the influence on Jo Cox MP of working as a post-university volunteer for Operation Raleigh’s Sabah project. She consequently took a leading role in international humanitarian aid work. As a newly elected British Member of Parliament she was brutally murdered in 2016 by a white supremacist assailant.

64 ‘100 student volunteers join YSS-Asean mission to Sarawak’, *Borneo Post*, 18 February 2016. See also Puteh Y., *The Malays of Sarawak*, for the endemic nature of rural deprivation.

65 ‘Young Korean volunteers learn from Tenom folks’, *Sabah Daily Express*, 24 July 2015 and ‘The economic impact of volunteerism’, *Borneo Post*, 13 March 2016.

education projects from Betong to Lahad Datu while making a notable impact supporting disability equality and self-advocacy.⁶⁶

In the new millennium the nature of international volunteering in East Malaysia has changed radically with the Borneo states making their own fast-growing contribution. This is admirably typified by the Sarawak medical house officer, while still training in Britain also volunteering to work for Voluntary Service Overseas in the Gambia. Now professionally established in Kuching she has volunteered again for Médecins sans Frontières, participating in the establishment of a new maternity hospital in eastern Afghanistan. In this she has followed another prominent paediatrician from Sarawak assisting families and children suffering extreme deprivation in Aceh and Afghanistan. Other volunteers from East Malaysia, often under the auspices of organisations such as Mercy Malaysia or the Malaysian Red Crescent, have worked overseas on humanitarian and development missions in places as far-flung as Kosovo, Cambodia and Iran. Sarawak and Sabah graduates have provided a significant input to the ‘Teach for Malaysia’ initiative mentoring underprivileged schoolchildren in West Malaysia, most notably an outstanding student from Sunway College and Harvard inspired by her father’s Peace Corps teacher in Lawas.⁶⁷ In Britain itself it has been another Kuching medical student celebrated as International Student of the Year for her work with young children and carers in Manchester’s deprived local communities.⁶⁸

Thus in many senses the story of overseas volunteering in Borneo comes full circle. Yet it is certainly not concluded. Volunteers from East Malaysia are making their own distinct contribution to a world-wide movement. There are echoes of the origins of international volunteering in the Fulbright English teaching assistant programme introduced into Sarawak

66 *JICA Activities Malaysia*; also Smith R.D., ‘Public-private volunteers abroad: JICA’s Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers’, *Highlighting Japan*, October 2013. Significantly, there is little other than official publicity about JOCV activities.

67 ‘The teacher who changed the life of my father and family in Ba’Kelalan’, *Teach for Malaysia*, 18 April 2017.

68 ‘Kuching lass shows why M’sia Boleh’, *Sunday Post*, 8 June 2008.

and Sabah in 2014, enabling young American graduates to support English language teaching in selected secondary schools. Some of those schools such as SMK Simanggang and SMK Pekan Kota Belud have seen teachers from every volunteer programme. More modest but even closer to the roots is Project Trust. Based in Scotland it engages school-leaver volunteers on year-long attachments assisting youth training centres, Outward Bound courses and junior colleges at Penampang, Papar, Semariang and - harking back to the very first volunteers in the Saribas - Betong. For both programmes the emphasis is on working in partnership with young people in a spirit of friendship and 'adventurous service'. It is clear from the experience of these British and American volunteers that, just as their predecessors, they have benefitted from the exceptional openness of society in East Malaysia. Equally they have been able to support and participate in a rich indigenous heritage of community and voluntary service.

In retrospect

So was it all worthwhile? An impossible question, it might be thought, covering six decades of international volunteering in constantly changing circumstances. Much of the historical account depends on volunteers' reminiscences. Expatriate memoirs prepared in the warm glow of retrospective imagination are always interesting and occasionally instructive but as a dispassionate record they are notoriously unreliable. The volunteer organisations themselves are not beyond constructing a narrative that owes much to the demands of recruitment publicity and donor sensitivities. Even where some systematic evaluation of volunteer programmes has been undertaken, the purpose has invariably been dominated by the partial interests of funding institutions. It might be said of the Peace Corps that "virtually no comprehensive effort has been undertaken to understand how the presence of the organization has affected a country"

but the same could apply to other volunteer programmes.⁶⁹ Yet international volunteering has a unique history in Borneo. There is no good reason to avoid judgement on its effect on local people and communities, on local counterparts and students, on the wider global audience and on the volunteers themselves. The attempt should be made, if only to prompt debate and draw out fresh perspectives.

For most volunteers the essential measure of achievement was the success of their project, both in a professional sense and a wider community context. There could be obstacles: inappropriate project selection; irrelevant training; occasionally primitive facilities and tropical illness; uncooperative and even hostile or predatory counterparts; and lack of support and resources, especially in isolated areas. Inevitably some volunteers failed to adapt to the needs of their projects.⁷⁰ Yet by and large the record in East Malaysia and Brunei is that these were challenges more readily overcome than elsewhere. From Lundu to Semporna the task may have been the basic but critical one of teaching to a standard sufficient for every student, especially those from the rural kampongs and longhouses. It may have been constructing a wooden suspension bridge at Padas Damit capable of withstanding the annual *landas* floods or establishing a sorely-needed upriver community health service at Tongud or Belaga. Sometimes there were opportunities to pass on technical skills and experience to local counterparts and equally to learn from them. The most satisfying outcome was always to use grassroots experience in identifying some unexposed need or occasion for innovation and pushing forward, on however small a scale, a sustainable solution.

The extent to which volunteers' efforts contributed to the overall economic and social development of the Borneo states is a more open question: even Sargent Shriver could confess that "we could send five hundred volunteers into Borneo and do a good job and the gross

⁶⁹ Searles P.D., *Peace Corps Experience*: 206.

⁷⁰ See, for example, Lynn B., 'Teaching among the giants', *Tanjong Lobang School*, 28 June 2005.

national product might still go down”. In the exceptional circumstances of the 1960s the ‘BA generalist’ volunteer made a crucial contribution. It might also be argued that the technically qualified volunteers of the 1980s helped develop the more extensive public service necessary to meet increasingly insistent social and economic expectations and an evolving civil society. More generally, however, the phrase most often used by volunteers themselves is “filling gaps”, whether VSO volunteers doubling for local agricultural officers on training assignments, CUSO cooperants working on national park planning or AVA agriculturalists “fattening Pharaoh’s kine” at Ranau. Sustainable development with lasting impact depended on strong institutional or community commitment. That commitment underpinned volunteers’ contribution to the Budu and Lemanak community development schemes. It was equally apparent more than thirty years later in the durable effectiveness of volunteers’ work in community-based rehabilitation for disabled people in Sarawak and Sabah’s successfully embedded environmental education programme. Lack of such commitment and misconceived if not perverse intentions could result in projects of limited effect and damaging impact, wasted resources and, at its worst, community disenchantment.⁷¹

There can, therefore, be varied verdicts on the contribution of the volunteer programmes to development in Borneo. Nevertheless, other criteria must be considered beyond those favoured by aid and technical assistance agencies. Especially in their relations with young people most volunteers could cut across cultural and social divides, expanding horizons including their own. The days when too easy intercourse with the ‘natives’ could ruin an expatriate career were consigned to the distant past.⁷² The relaxed boundless discussion, whether on a school expedition, on the longhouse *ruai* or over many a glass of *tapai* was as much a contribution to

71 The abrupt abandonment of ‘hearts and minds’ efforts by Commonwealth military units at the end of *Konfrontasi* and subsequent government neglect had even more deleterious consequences. Many resettlement, land utilisation and forestry conservation schemes were either masked counter-insurgency projects or, in the long run, patently exploitative.

72 See Phillips D.J., ‘He cuts little ice with the natives’: Kenelm Digby, Sarawak’s red attorney-general’, *Borneo Research Bulletin* 2016.

social development as road-building or classroom teaching. The volunteer's relative lack of inhibition, irritating to some but generally acceptable in Borneo's more open society, helped surmount customary prejudice, especially in supporting disadvantaged groups. Conversely, there was much to learn from that society and environment: one of the first VSO volunteers, still speaking fluent Iban after fifty years, assembled a treasure-trove of local legends and *pantuns* meticulously transcribed in a standard school exercise book. For another young pioneer the impact of the verdant jungle foliage of the then unspoilt Ulu Baram suffuses his present-day depictions of the glories of the natural world.⁷³ Such unique interchange may have helped volunteers acquire "skills for tackling the professional, informational and cultural challenges of network capitalism".⁷⁴ The record of enduring friendships and loyalties suggests a deeper impact.⁷⁵

For a great many volunteers that impact was, in the trite but justified phrase, 'life-changing'. A recent Lord Mayor of London could disarmingly confess to time spent as a VSO teacher in Brunei "largely on the beach" or Kinky Friedman might claim that his contribution as a 4H Club organiser at Long Lama was "building compost heaps" and getting drunk. Yet the Lord Mayor had a lifetime supporting local charities, especially in London's impoverished East End, and even Kinky's 'Texas Jewboys' acknowledged a debt in their country music 'Wild Man from Borneo'.⁷⁶ Former volunteers' contributions to international development, social and economic justice, minority rights and environmental protection are daunting: the VSA physician at Kapit district hospital now helping to train radiologists in remote areas of East Africa and the Pacific islands; the VSO teacher at Betong joining with eminent Borneo anthropologist Tom Harrison to debate issues of poverty and inequity with wealthy overseas

⁷³ <http://www.jimmyday.com.ve>.

⁷⁴ Vrasti W., *Volunteer Tourism in the Global South*: 52.

⁷⁵ See, for example, 'Why they're singing On Ilkla Moor Baht 'At in Borneo', *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 30 December 2008; 'Volunteer 'bowled over' by Borneo return', *The Scotsman*, 12 February 2009; and 'Lives inspired by the Peace Corps', *Borneo Post*, 4 September 2012.

⁷⁶ 'Lone Star: Kinky Friedman on the campaign trail', *The New Yorker*, 22 August 2005.

students in London; the AVA teacher trainers and nutritionists subsequently supporting Australian indigenous communities; the prominent Canadian broadcaster drawing on his CUSO experience in Borneo to challenge official development orthodoxies as well as the first leader of Canada's Green Party and founder of the global cities health movement; the first Peace Corps agricultural extension worker in the Rejang devoting a career to international food security and armed conflict resolution; the innumerable instances inspired by the Borneo volunteer experience of combating prejudice and welcoming diversity...the list is endless.

There has been an equal contribution to regional and local welfare. Former volunteers in the Borneo states have been involved in supporting vulnerable communities in Timor Leste, Cambodia, Papua New Guinea and the Pacific islands. Their commitment has shown itself in medical relief, social support, promotion of agricultural sustainability, conservation of natural resources and countering the increasingly disastrous effects of climate change. They have been equally prominent in the advancement of knowledge, especially in indigenous languages, culture and conditions and the evolution of contemporary society, in East Malaysia and Brunei. Continuing concern for the future of Borneo's unique environment, heritage and peoples is demonstrated by active volunteer involvement in initiatives from the globally renowned Rainforest World Music Festival to the Borneo Project and other campaigns against decades of cynical exploitation. Whether it is through networks of returned volunteers such as Friends of Malaysia or individual schemes such as arrangements for medical electives there is a sustained commitment to positive interchange. Nowhere, of course, is this more evident than in the local partnerships of former volunteers and the dedication of the Borneo states' own volunteers, all carrying with them the promise of a continuing legacy.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ See, for example, 'The love story of Richard and Habibah', *Borneo Post*, 4 June 2012 and 'What goes around comes around', *Borneo Post*, 5 August 2012. The mutual reinforcement of overseas and local volunteer initiatives has also been a strong theme in the history of international volunteering in Borneo since the pioneering partnerships of young Dayak 'volunteers' and their overseas counterparts at Budu, Padawan and Lemanak.

The first British, New Zealand and Australian school-leavers who volunteered for community development projects in the Borneo states demonstrated, against many expectations at the time, that ‘adventurous service’ for young people in remote underdeveloped areas was both practicable and valuable. Much of this success derived from the exceptionally open and hospitable nature of Borneo society. It pointed the way towards a global movement of international volunteering. In the 1960s the volunteer contribution, greatly strengthened by the advent of the Peace Corps ‘BA generalist’ and Canadian cooperants, was critical in developing an adequate education system and thereby enabling local people to meet the unexpected demands of development and independence within Malaysia. In the 1980s overseas volunteers, many of them experienced specialists and augmented by Australian, German and Japanese representation, had a significant role in the evolution of civil society and public service in East Malaysia. Whether in Borneo or elsewhere volunteers were in no position to overcome political vicissitudes, social and bureaucratic catalepsy or the deeper forces that shape societies. Yet overall it must be granted that in the Borneo states they were a force for good and that Borneo enabled them to be so. A Peace Corps volunteer was inspired by Sarawak’s “wonderfully clear night-time skies” to study the stars from the riverbank of the remote Sungei Anap. Now she is one of America’s most distinguished planetary scientists. Truly, from Sarawak to the world...and beyond.⁷⁸

78 This article could not have been written without the many fascinating contributions of former volunteers and the cooperation of the volunteer organisations. However, the views expressed are entirely the author’s responsibility. Especial thanks are due to Tan Sri Alfred Jabu, Tan Sri Empiang Jabu and the Sarawak state government for their very generous support of the 2008 celebration of fifty years of overseas voluntary service.

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