Doing Good Well

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Repair the World's **new report** on their short term Jewish service learning programs takes on the efficacy question from the other side: Instead of asking if the programs are doing Jewish well, it asks whether they're doing good well.

In that sense, it's an interesting counter-point to studies like the **Cohen Center**'s **3 part set** on the Break New Ground Jewish Service Learning Initiative. **The Second Year: Evaluation of the Break New Ground Jewish Service Learning Initiative** In their **second year report**, for example, "researchers examined characteristics of participants, their reactions to fundamental components of the BNG program, and the impacts of BNG on participants' development of a Jewish perspective on service, commitment to volunteerism and social action, and connections to Jewish life." Contrast that to Repair the World's study, which "was designed to capture how a host community's experience with short-term IJSL programs affected the community from the perspective of the leaders of the community based organizations/non-governmental organizations (CBO/NGO) in those communities."

Short term service/volunteering programs have been subject to skepticism, both inside and outside the Jewish community. For example, earlier this year, the **Human Sciences Research Council** issued a scathing **report** about the "thriving industry of AIDS orphan tourism": even when the orphanages in question and their needs are legitimate, hosting volunteers increases overhead significant overhead costs to the orphanage, crowd out local workers, and subject the children to a continual formation and dissolution of caregiver relationships and the attendant psychological costs.

Nevertheless, Repair the World's study found that it is very possible to run a short term service program that brings both short and long term benefits not just to participants but to the host community itself. Some benefits they identified included:

- Projects can jump start residents into participating in the service.
- Projects are opportunities for host communities to develop local leaders.
- Host communities receive resources that they would not otherwise have.
- Host communities enjoy and feel they benefit from cultural exchange with volunteers.
- Host community members build individual relationships and make meaningful connections with the volunteers.
- Participation in short-term IJSL projects can also contribute to a shift in community self-identity — an enhanced belief among community members that they have the inherent capacity to be strong and vibrant moving forward.

Interestingly, they also found that the fact that the service programs were Jewish made a much bigger difference for Jewish host communities than non-Jewish ones.

Through qualitative interviews, they identified challenges of running a good short term program and tactics for running it well. Certain organizational elements must be in place in both the host community and the organization running the short term program, and they must share a common understanding of the possibilities and limits of a short term program.

Repair the World's report and the Cohen Center's reports on the Break New Ground program often complement one another and reinforce each-others' findings. For example, the Cohen Center found that

> The most frequent answer to an open-ended survey question about the greatest disappointment with their BNG experience was the service work itself, cited by 24% of respondents. As one participant explained, “the community service work we did wasn’t real work and wasn’t really beneficial to the community.”

...and Repair the World makes the following recommendation:

> The short time frame of these IJSL [intensive Jewish service learning] programs means that only some projects are appropriate. Within these time limits, host community representatives say it is important for both the volunteers and the community to be able to see the result of their work. IJSL organizations and host communities are mindful of this when planning a project.

With the popularity of service learning programs apparently growing, it is frankly a relief to hear that the Jewish community is not (necessarily) working to build Jewish identity in a way that harms other communities and that our programs can and do bring both short term and lasting benefits to others. At the conclusion of the report, Repair the World offers a series of best practices and recommendations for short term programs (and Repair the World itself). Most of these are not specifically Jewish and should be of great use to any organization planning service projects - as research on the ground is regrettably slight across the board. Kudos.