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Working from Within: Observations of Non-Governmental Efforts to Decrease Social Marginalization in Buenos Aires

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This essay is a modification of an excerpt from the senior thesis written for the Chancellor's Honors Program at The University of Tennessee. The complete project—titled “Bringing the Outside In: An Examination of Non-Governmental Aid Organizations in Buenos Aires”—first examines the political and economic history of Argentina as a context from which to understand the current stage of actors in the social sector. Then, drawing from my fieldwork in the slums surrounding urban Buenos Aires, it introduces the twelve organizations I studied that work with issues of poverty and development, exploring organizational elements that aid or limit a nonprofit's efficacy. Finally, it concludes with my own project proposal; a submission of a way to incorporate the most effective elements into one organization. As this paper is just a piece of a larger work, I have chosen to highlight only the data from my time spent in Buenos Aires in 2011, leaving out the introductory sections that give political and economic context, as well as the project proposal. This paper assumes the economic context as briefly mentioned above, and focuses wholly on the characteristics of the studied organizations, and how they enhance – or hinder – organizational efficacy. It examines the structure and program implementation of these organizations, critically reviewing them as agents of change.

Introduction

One hand clutching that of my little *guía*'s as she led the way, the other with a firm grasp on an oversized, brightly colored plastic bag full of leftover lunch supplies, a mostly-empty two gallon water jug, and a fútbol, I followed nine-year old Milagros as she and her sister Isabel escorted Aurelie and me through the back alleys of *Ciudad Oculta*—a slum of Buenos Aires—at dusk on a biting cold Saturday in late May. We had left the paved road, and now found ourselves on a narrow dirt alley-way that was densely lined by tin,

wood, cement, and cardboard shacks three and four stories high. The ground was uneven and the alley narrow, making it nearly impossible for cars to get through; even motorcycles would only occasionally make their way between the people-filled passages, littered with trash and lethargic stray dogs. Already there were men setting up grills and coolers of beer; *cumbia* blasted from a radio carried by a teenager as several of his friends began to dance around him; the small dirt streets were lit up by lanterns and single-bulb lights hanging on wires from doorway to doorway. The indistinct grays and blacks which I had come to associate with this place were transformed by the sporadic light into hazy browns and even blacker blacks, in the shadows and between buildings.

Aurelie and I, interns at VIDA Argentina, had taken 19 children between the ages of 9 and 14 from this *villa* on the outskirts of Buenos Aires to a touristy area in the city for a photography workshop. We had aimed to have them home in time to get ourselves back to our office before dark, but the buses that go to the *villas* run less frequently on weekend evenings and the trip into the slum took much longer than normal. Now we found ourselves being led through small backstreets and passages that cut between rows of houses stacked one on top of another to where we could hire a car to take us back to the city center. As I walked, I watched the *villa* come alive in a way that it never had during the day, and I was very conscious of the brightly colored Disney bag I was toting, of my blondness and Aurelie's *frenchness*, and of the fact that these two little girls – our charges – were the ones “protecting” us; they were our “in.” The girls moved without fear, though they also did not greet anyone. They would occasionally look back over their shoulders at us, to let us know that we were almost there. The carefree chatter from the day spent taking photos in the market was noticeably absent. This was *their* home, and we were not in danger, *per se*—but the tenseness was clear, and all four of us hurried through the darkened maze of the *villa* interior.

Not only are slums like *Ciudad Oculta* common in Argentina, they are constant realities in nearly every Latin American city; Alan Gilbert describes shantytowns as the “archetypal symbol of housing in Latin America.” In fact, CEPAL statistics from 2002 show urban poverty in Latin America at 38.4 percent, and extreme urban poverty at 13.5 percent. In Greater Buenos Aires specifically, it is estimated that 10 percent of the metropolitan population are slum dwellers or live in an informal settlement of some kind. Between 2001 and 2006, the number of people living in the *villas* of Buenos Aires doubled from 639,000 to 1.14 million, no doubt largely as a result of the social, political, and economic crisis of 2001-2002. Though, the numbers of residents in these areas did not decrease as other economic indicators stabilized in the years following the crisis. In fact, *villa* populations continue to rise in Argentina and across the continent.

Undoubtedly, Milagros and Isabel do not remember the events of late 2001 that caused Argentina to spiral into deep recession, nor do they understand the political reasoning behind the national leaders' actions. They do, however, live with the consequences of these actions. Their lives are shaped by the hardships and inequality of life in a *villa*: their education is substandard, access to food and potable water is unreliable, and safety is always a concern. Throughout their lives, they will face difficulties and make decisions far different from other girls their age, and they will always find themselves at a disadvantage in society. While these two may only know of the crisis through the memories of their parents, they live with the constant reality of its marginalizing effects and the sharp distinction of being “the other.”

Media gives us visuals of slum spaces like Ciudad Oculta through films like *City of God*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, and *Favela Rising*: they show images of acres of shacks built out of tin and plywood, young barefoot children playing unattended, drug lords controlling neighborhoods, and a culture inspiring neither desire nor rationale to attend school. Although “success stories” of individuals escaping these lives of poverty become box-office successes, the reality is that most people born into poverty will not be able to break free from it. Children born poor are less likely to finish secondary school: “in 2002, only two out of ten ‘poor’ youth finished or went beyond high school”, and it is increasingly difficult to earn enough to live above the poverty line with only a primary education. Economists Ricardo Morán, Tarsicio Castañeda, and Enrique Aldaz-Carroll discuss how the Intergenerational Transition of Poverty (ITP) – the idea that a child is necessarily “trapped” into the same poverty of his or her parents – renders children unable to “reach lifetime income and consumption levels that would lift them out of poverty.” Despite showing falsely sensational stories of rags-to-riches successes, popular culture does give haunting impressions of poverty and filth, danger and drugs, overpopulation and under-education that, indeed, are often very close parallels to the reality of these areas.

In Buenos Aires, one of the starkest examples of explicit inequality and blatant marginalization is Villa 31. The oldest, largest, and most known shantytown in the city, Villa 31 is located quite literally on the wrong side of the tracks. Positioned on a 0.34 km² parcel of land between the train and bus stations, just blocks from one of the most expensive shopping districts of the city, this slum of over 26,000 people (a low estimate, by many opinions) is a not-so-hidden reminder of the extreme marginalization that exists in Buenos Aires. The residents of Villa 31 live in the midst of one of the most trafficked parts of the city, a short walk from the financial district of the capital, and, with a ratio of over 85,000 persons per km², the streets are crowded with makeshift houses built five and six stories high. One cannot take a bus or northbound train out of the city without this clear example of the wealth disparity present in Argentina, a country often excluded from the “poor” or “developing” country lists.

The problem of extreme marginalization is, of course, not restricted to Latin America. Globally, nearly 1 billion people live in urban slums. Almost one third of the world’s urban population are slum dwellers, and in the urban south this proportion rises to a staggering 50 percent. Given the recent global population milestone of 7 billion, this carries significant weight. As areas of dense urban poverty are increasing around the world, so too is the need for effective solutions. In order to combat this global issue, there need to be agents working to counterbalance it. Urban poverty is an alarming reality; however, it is not an unavoidable or inevitable problem. Nor is it a chance phenomenon. People are not simply struck with the sudden conviction to move themselves and their families to the city where, due to their income, skill set, and the availability of jobs, they will almost certainly be living in slums with the worst conditions imaginable. Urban poverty is a problem that could be mitigated by states, yet it is not.

Many governments have been hindered from maintaining a healthy Welfare State for political reasons often outside of their control. An increasingly believed doctrine is that development – and *economic growth* – will only be made possible through *less* government in the social sector, and more reliance on a free market system. The wave of neoliberalism in the 1980s and 1990s, which brought with it devastating “structural adjustment policies” is one example of governments being pressured by external agents to enact policies which overwhelmingly hurt the poor and working classes.

In situations where a nation's government has largely withdrawn from the social sector, the work of non-state agents plays a large role. This project takes a look at the contemporary system of aid in Buenos Aires, Argentina and analyzes the processes of primary non-governmental aid organizations. From the context of a minimized state, I attempt to examine the work and efficacy of these non-governmental organizations, comparing their proposed objectives, specific initiatives, and self-perceptions in regards to how they fit into the greater structure of aid.

Research Plan

This article centers on exploring the actions of non-governmental organizations in a social sector from which the state is very detached. Prior to my time in Argentina, I had conducted preliminary research through a literature review on the political and economic history of the country. Given the historical context I had been studying, I arrived in Buenos Aires seeking an understanding of current social justice initiatives. As I began my fieldwork in Argentina, I hoped to better understand the influence of these organizations in terms of the people of the *villa*, as well as highlight some of the challenges that they face. My research was conducted over the course of six months. From January to July of 2011 I lived and worked in Buenos Aires, dividing my time between an internship at VIDA Argentina – a nonprofit that provides after-school support for children in five community centers in Gran Buenos Aires – and conducting interviews with directors, founders, and presidents of comparable organizations.

With VIDA, I divided my time between office work and in-field activities, gaining experience with the administrative side of the non-profit and a familiarity with the communities and individuals with which it operates. In the office, my duties included receiving and replying to all of VIDA's emails, mostly from future volunteers and interns, leading the orientation sessions for new volunteers, and being part of a "research and marketing" team. Being a part of the team in such an integral way was key as I developed an understanding of how VIDA functions and of how similar organizations function. As an intern, I was also a site-coordinator at Laferrere, our activity site located just outside the city. I prepared the children's activities each day, was a constant intermediary between our contact at Laferrere and the office, and facilitated the experience of the VIDA volunteers – from their arrival at the office to the transport between the city and our activity site, and then back to the city center. This experience, in addition to being part of the administrative aspects, showed me how an organization like VIDA operates on the ground. The perspective I gained from my internship was monumentally beneficial because it gave me a fundamental knowledge of an NGO in Buenos Aires, as well as a basis from which I could identify characteristics and patterns in the organizations I interviewed.

While the fieldwork in Laferrere and Ciudad Oculta—alongside the managerial experience at VIDA—offered me a deep understanding of one organization's core operations, my interviews with directors of similar NGOs gave me a broader perspective of the range of programs that exist. Although I attempted to limit my selection to organizations with similar goals and target communities, there was still great diversity in the scope of my sample. In total, I interviewed 19 social organizations. This analysis uses only the twelve that either work specifically with children, within villa communities, or that give insight on the concept of international volunteerism. This analysis excludes those whose focus is on research, adults, or those which are located in rural regions of the outer-lying provinces.

The organizations I spoke with showed a wide range of practice in project methodology, volunteer dynamics, and source of funding. Of the twelve organizations in this analysis, two are based in Gran Buenos Aires; ten are in Buenos Aires capital; five have operations or partners in other provinces of the country; three were founded by non-Argentines; ten are still directed by their original founders; one is a community cooperative that operates locally with individuals and families of the neighborhood; and one is a national organization that works with school systems and smaller NGOs to carry out its projects. The heterogeneity of the group gives breadth to the study by showing multiple approaches to the same social issues.

Overview of VIDA Argentina

VIDA Argentina began as a small project started by an Argentine woman named Rosa, and has grown to one of the organizations in Buenos Aires with the most international volunteers. Rosa has been involved with social work all her life, and the economic, social, and political crisis of 2001 spurred her to organize something concrete from which to organize her projects. Although VIDA was not officially registered until 2005, Rosa began laying the foundations of the organization in 2001. With the intent to “let kids be kids” and to provide a safe space to experience the simple joys of childhood, Rosa began going into Ciudad Oculta—one of Buenos Aires’ largest villas—to throw birthday parties with a team of her own children and close friends. This principle intention hinges on an important concept: children in the villa grow up tremendously fast. At the age of 12 and 13, many are already the caretakers of younger siblings and are facing life decisions of dropping out or of graduating secondary, having sex and, potentially, children of their own, and using and dealing *paco*, an extremely addictive drug. Anyone, then, that gives them the space to safely be children—to play fútbol, or color, or read a book, or just to hand off their baby sister or brother to a volunteer for two hours—is incredibly relevant to these children.

Over time, Rosa and her children began networking with organizations and universities in North America and Europe, recruiting volunteers and financial support, and VIDA grew to be known as an organization that welcomed internationals with open arms. As the volume of volunteers grew, so did the ability to expand the projects. In 2005 the office in Recoleta was rented to house the organization’s institutional activities, which were needed to fully operate all the projects. Organizationally, VIDA is composed of Rosa and her family, interns, and volunteers. Rosa works at the managerial level together with her son, Darian, and daughter, Ramona. At any given time, there are between three and eight interns, all foreigners. It is typical to have the flux of interns follow the pattern of a northern hemisphere university schedule. The interns all work both in the office and as site-coordinators, staying between two months and one year. Interns are responsible for the behind-the-scenes functioning of the office, the orientation of new volunteers, and the preparation of daily activities for the kids. Finally, the volunteers are those that come and assist with projects – staying a minimum of two weeks and going on two or three activities per week.

VIDA has five activity sites at either full or partial *comedores*—similar to soup kitchens, though with varied levels of meals provided and government dependency. Four of these are in Ciudad Oculta, or Villa 15. The fifth is in Gregorio de Laferrere, which is neither a villa nor in the city itself. The four regular components to VIDA’s work at these sites are after-school support, monthly photography workshops, play days, and, of course, birthday parties. School support is held twice a week at each site, and birthday parties are

held every Wednesday on a rotation schedule between the sites so that each month all the children whose birthdays were that month are celebrated.

The main project, "School Support," is an educational after-school activity for children that both gives them access to college-aged students as personal tutors and serves the practical purpose of physically taking kids off the streets for a few hours each week. For two days a week, the children are with VIDA in the time between getting out of school and eating dinner – time that would have been spent on the street. Instead, they work with the volunteers on either homework they have brought or, more often, on worksheets provided by VIDA. One of the recent initiatives is an incentive system by which the children complete their worksheets. In it, the site-coordinator creates a *carpeta*, or folder, for each child, into which he or she places the completed work of that child. All work is recorded, and there is a system of stickers and prizes to encourage the children in their progress. The *carpetas* have turned out to hold two benefits beyond simply recording what the child has or has not completed. First, the site-coordinators can begin to pre-plan the work for each child, giving out individualized worksheets and homework. Second, and much more important, is the overwhelmingly positive reaction of the kids; they love to have a *carpeta* that is *theirs* – many kids paste their prize stickers on the folder itself. Having something that has their name on it—that is so uniquely their own—is something novel for most children. This, though not the main objective of the system, is certainly one of the most positive direct results.

Play workshops, an alternative to School Support, generally happens only in the summer for the regular programs or during holidays, following the kids' school schedule. However, the recent addition of two parador locations, have made these play periods a year-round activity. Typically these range from lightly educational games of matching, puzzles, and counting to coloring, jump rope, and card games. VIDA occasionally does special event days for Christmas, Easter, Kids' Day in August, and sometimes on the request of visiting volunteer groups. Also, in the late summer before school starts, school supplies are given to all of the children, and, at the same time, the children receive a pair of shoes – VIDA works with an international shoe company that operates a global "one-for-one" aid project that donates one pair of shoes to a needy child for every pair sold.

Another secondary, yet fundamental project is the monthly photography workshop, a day when older children may go into the city center, accompanied by staff and volunteers, to take photos in parks and tourist districts of Buenos Aires. Any volunteers participating lend their cameras to the kids for the afternoon, and often each camera is shared between two or three children. These photography workshops are especially anticipated by the youth who participate. It is not surprising that exploring unvisited parts of their city, spending relaxed time one-on-one with volunteers and interns, and being creative is enjoyable for adolescents. However, from a more sociological perspective, this is also a really important day for the children. Like the after-school activities, photography days get the children off the streets – even more importantly, these photography excursions get children out of the villa completely for an entire day. Not only do these excursions bring a reprieve from villa life, they also bring an often unheard message of trust. For one day a month, each child is handed the personal camera of a foreigner, with a message they very rarely hear: one of trust. For Rosa's goal of letting villa kids know that they are normal, this statement is key: they are not distrusted simply because they come from a villa. Indeed, there is a discernible boost of confidence and self-esteem in every child as they use their borrowed cameras.

Also, despite the organization's growth and with the addition of many people and projects in the last ten years, birthday parties remain a special and untouched aspect of the program. Each child is given an individualized gift; there are fanciful decorations and

specially decorated boys' and girls' cakes. For Rosa, this remains one of the most important things: that the children of the villas be treated the same as children anywhere, with the same hopes and wants – and that they be treated as such, regardless of their socio-economic status. Birthday parties are special: they recognize the individual child as significant, and this is the message that Rosa wants each child to receive.

However, while VIDA is primarily an action-based organization that relies on volunteers' donation of time, even projects centered on the less tangible needs of kids also occasionally and necessarily deal with the physical and practical ones, adding to the organization's operational costs. School supplies are given to every child in the fall; gifts are given on Christmas, Kids' day, and birthdays; food is supplied during special events; and the *merienda*, or afternoon snack, is offered at every school support. While many items are donated to VIDA by local businesses, the organization also charges a fee to all of its incoming volunteers – a decision that is highly contested among the NGO leaders with whom I spoke. Rosa does not, however, receive any money from the state, and views government financial aid to NGOs very poorly, claiming that it will then attempt to control the organization's actions.

Rosa's goal for the future is to expand the organization enough to be able to run activities to each of the activity sites every day of the school week – an action that would increase the number of activities by over 100 percent. The idea of moving the office to a neighborhood closer to a villa has been discussed in staff meetings, though this would mean an almost certain drop in foreign volunteers, as many feel comfortable coming to VIDA only because of its office location in such a known and easily accessible part of town. The future of VIDA is not yet certain, though expansion is definitely on Rosa's mind.

Comparative Findings

From the beginning, my goal was to understand who the non-governmental actors are, what they do for the development of vulnerably poor communities and if these actions are, ultimately, effective. To find this efficacy, I have identified shared traits and tendencies among my sample study, forming units by which to measure the projects. For this article, I primarily focus on VIDA, using the others as comparative models.

These common traits range from very practical and tangible commonalities – like location, finances, and volunteer demographics – to more abstract themes such the level of networking between organizations of similar mission and perspectives on the government. Often these different categories blend and overlap; no issue is unaffected by any of the others. However, by classifying the organizations in this way, there can at least be a starting point from which the organizations can be examined, compared, and understood. I draw from my interviews as well as my own experiences to give examples and analyze the trends presented by these organizations.

Location

The wind picked up a crumpled newspaper and blew it across the empty street. The sidewalks were abandoned, as was the road; it was as if I had come into a ghost town. The only person I could see—a woman—stood a block away, sweeping leaves from her apartment's doorstep into the street. She stopped as I approached, and appeared startled when I asked where I could find a specific street; nothing was well-marked. She looked at me for a moment, and then replied that she did not know, that she was not familiar with any roads beyond her own.

“Ojo,” she then warned, “*dos cuadras más y estarás en la villa*: two more blocks and you’ll be in the villa.”

I was approaching 1-11-14, a villa located in Bajo Flores, which is the southern portion of Flores, a “legitimate” neighborhood in south-central Buenos Aires. In other words, this slum is the subsection of a subsection of a neighborhood – even still, it is inhabited by over 20,000 people, an estimate of the government census of 1999/2000; if 1-11-14 is like other villas in the city, that number has surely increased in the last 10 years. On that day, I had an appointment with the director of an organization that works with women and children of 1-11-14, and so had come with purpose. Yet, from the moment I stepped off the bus – indeed, from the moment I had remained on the bus past the last tourist or “central” location –, I had been warily regarded and scanned for what reasons I could possibly find myself in this part of town.

Arriving at Luz Creciente’s office minutes later, with the grey view of the villa just across the street, I reflected on the difference between this organization and those that are located in the heart of Buenos Aires, to whose offices one can easily walk from any central location in the city. Indeed, where its headquarters are is exceptionally indicative of the organization as a whole: it shows the relationship with the community it aims to serve. The priority of the organization’s volunteers and the ideology of how “help” should be distributed is also made blatantly evident by where the administrative operations are – whether in the financial district downtown, a wealthy suburb of the city, or in the villa itself. For Luz Creciente and a few others, the entire operation – office, *comedor*, and classroom spaces – is located on site or, in this case, on the street that separates the *villa* from the rest of the “proper” *barrio*.

Moreover, the location of the organization and the scope of projects it provides are often correlated. Luz Creciente was one of three of the organizations I interviewed with community centers located in or directly adjacent the villas with which they work. These were, concurrently, the three with the widest range of targeted age groups; they have daycares and kindergarten, English classes for all age levels, homework help for school children, and skill-building workshops for adults. The close contact with the community facilitates the many projects for the members of that area. Because they are permanent installations in the neighborhood, their interactions show an awareness and inclusion of the community. They are immersed in the *barrio*, and so are able to see and meet needs that an outside organization – entering and leaving the villa on a daily or weekly basis – may not see.

Also, as the community surrounding these organizations begin to see the center as not only a permanent, positive fixture in the neighborhood, they begin to approach it freely, voicing their specific needs and concerns. Over time, projects begin to be initiated by community members, giving the organization even more legitimacy in the area as well as an ownership of the organization by the community itself. In all the time I spent at Vivimos Juntos, a community center located in Ciudad Oculta, the door bell was consistently ringing, and Cristina – a resident of the villa and the adopted “mother” of all the children, coordinators, and volunteers – was constantly on her feet greeting mothers, children, and other community members taking names and phone numbers, giving advice, and, of course, feeding everyone who had the time to sit and eat. Clearly, Vivimos Juntos is known not only as a safe space but, also, as a useful one. And, so, the range of those it reaches expands to be community-wide, not merely including those involved with specific class and workshops.

In contrast to organizations like Vivimos Juntos and Luz Creciente, several other organizations – including VIDA – have offices situated in the center of the city and surrounding wealthy neighborhoods—like the Magnificent Mile in Chicago. Undoubtedly, this is most convenient for their volunteers. As these organizations tend to have far more foreign volunteers than the organizations located further out of the centralized area of the city, their placement makes sense for those new to and unfamiliar with Buenos Aires. Volunteers at Luz Creciente and other inner-villa organizations must travel to some of the most dangerous areas of the city, and this often results in foreign volunteers being less willing to make the trip. While those who work with VIDA and other similar organizations likely have an easier experience, the tradeoff of quantity of volunteers for quality of community relationships seems a high price to pay.

Volunteers; or, Local vs. Foreign

One of the most varied practices among the interviewed organizations was their volunteers: who they are, what they do, and how long they stay. Some organizations have no discernible way of being a “part-time” volunteer; others refuse to take a volunteer who cannot stay for more than three months, or who does not speak Spanish; one is literally based upon the idea of the transient, foreign volunteer. The rest fall scattered in between, each with its own characteristics and tendencies. In fact, all twelve organizations have varying levels of volunteer collaboration. The level to which the volunteer is incorporated in the organization – from being a temporary aide to being a key, decision-making team member – affects how an organization interacts with the community as much as the location of the organization.

When I first arrived at the VIDA office, I was surprised to find that not only was my orientation session presented in English, but also that English was the evident language of business in the office. Given that this was an Argentine organization in Buenos Aires, which worked with underprivileged children in local *villas*, I had assumed that I would be expected to rapidly improve my Spanish skills. What I found, though, was that the majority of the volunteers at VIDA are native English-speakers, most of whom speak minimal Spanish. In addition, the foreign interns primarily handle the administrative and activity-site duties, and are often the only ones present at the office. Interns manage the volunteers’ experiences – from preliminary emails and orientations to transportation and activity coordination. For this reason, many outsiders view VIDA itself as being a foreign organization and are often surprised to learn that Rosa, the founder, is Argentine. However, VIDA does not stand alone in this regard; many of the organizations I interviewed have a high ratio of foreign to local volunteers. In fact, every single organization has non-native volunteers, and in half of my sample study, they outnumbered local volunteers. VIDA and Voluntario Internacional, an organization similar in structure, both have exclusively international volunteers, almost all of which are from English-speaking countries.

As discussed in the previous section, the organizations that operate on a very local level typically have few to no international volunteers. As these are located in or near the villas, they are often the most difficult for an outsider to find, as they are largely off the radar – with either no website or one that is not connected to any international networks, a foreigner seeking work would not readily find these to be viable options when searching for a potential volunteer opportunity. Concurrently, minimal to no online presence also means that these smaller projects tend to have more Argentine volunteers who are better able to manage the culture and the process of finding and building contacts and connections. While the more “local” organizations will allow a foreigner to volunteer, they do so

only provided that this individual can proficiently communicate in Spanish, has living and transportation arrangements, and has a useful skill for the organization. Often, too, these volunteers will stay for long periods of time – at least five or six months and often up to one or two years.

Whether or not individuals should be required to pay to volunteer for a social organization is probably the most debated aspect of volunteerism that I found throughout my interviews. Some organizations charge a mandatory donation to volunteer, though they also give their volunteers certain perks – from a tee-shirt to daily transportation to housing for the duration of the volunteer “experience.” VIDA and Voluntario Internacional fall into this category, with the latter certainly being more of a “complete package” kind of volunteer experience, assisting with travel and accommodation plans. Others are opposed to this kind of organizational strategy, believing that volunteered time is donation enough. The director of one organization commented, “if they [the volunteers] are giving their time, why would we force them to pay, too? That is robbery, they can donate money if they want, or just buy a t-shirt, or nothing at all, if they choose.” I found that it is often the organizations that have the most international volunteers that charge a fee. Perhaps this is due to the wealth – real or assumed – of their incoming volunteers, or the willingness and even expectation of foreigners to pay for their volunteering abroad experience. The result is an environment of “help” that too often resembles tourism; a supply and demand structure that runs the risk of exploiting the very populations it intends to help.

Through all of my interviews and observations, I found that having locals involved in any initiative is key to its success. It is vital for the children to not only be given role models, but specifically role models to whom they can relate. Having a foreigner assist with math homework is fine – beneficial even – yet the understood fact is that this foreigner is temporary. This brevity of volunteers does not foster an environment of stability and accountability – an element that these children so vitally need. Also, having role models that understand them more than foreigners can is beneficial for kids.

However, directors of the organizations that primarily work with foreign volunteers continually gave me the same reasoning for not having more, or any, local volunteers: Argentines simply do not want to help. They would insist that the culture of aid and volunteering just does not exist in Argentina as it does in other countries. Given the western culture of outreach and volunteerism – to the extent of having these as requisites for college entrance and scholarships –, such a comparison is easy to make. However, other organizations have many local volunteers and some – like Luz Creciente – are almost entirely staffed by Argentines; directors of these organizations do not speak of any lack of national willingness or desire to give time to humanitarian projects. Indeed, from my experience, there seem to be many socially-driven Argentines – they are simply not working with organizations like VIDA or Voluntario Internacional. As these are the organizations that cater to foreign volunteers in location, language requirements, and time commitment, it is my hypothesis that the apparent lack of local support is really a disinterest of locals to be involved with *specific projects*; few Argentines want to pay money to volunteer in a largely English-speaking environment with co-volunteers who are constantly changing and with whom they have very little in common.

Volunteers often make up the majority of an organization’s “work force” and, as such, the breakdown of these volunteers sheds light on the priorities of the organization itself. Some organizations seem more outwardly focused than being concentrated on local issues; that is, they are more interested in increasing their international support than strengthening their relationships within their communities. Also, trends surrounding the

volunteer are important in considering an organization's work. Projects that use primarily foreign volunteers must be understood as having limitations that organizations consisting of only locals do not have. These limitations range from obvious and surface-level obstacles like volunteers have a deficient grasp of the language and so being restricted in their communication with children or community members, to more fundamental issues like transitory volunteers who are unfamiliar with the kids' culture being unable to develop lasting connections within an activity site.

Networks

Sitting in a hard-backed folding chair, shivering slightly from the cold creeping through the thin walls of the fire department building on the June afternoon, I quietly ate food from the refreshment table and wondered how I had managed to find myself among this specific group of individuals. Seated in similar chairs in a wide circle – also shivering, also eating –, were about twenty school counselors, directors of social organizations, and psychologists, all discussing child abuse: what it consists of, how to detect it, and how to deal with it – legally *and* emotionally. A guest psychologist who specializes in child abuse presented a general lecture on the topic, then answered specific questions brought up concerning the varied communities and situations of each attendee. The meeting was informal, yet serious; professional, yet clearly composed of a group of friends—or at least like-minded acquaintances with similar passions and goals. I had been invited by Claire, the founder of Hogar de Fernando, an after-school program for villa kids focused on the arts and giving children a safe place to explore creativity.

This informational get-together is a clear example of the inter-organizational co-operation that is essential among social organizations. Although each deals with differing populations, they all share common themes. Joining together – whether to complete a project or just for sharing information and support – is something that is both beneficial and logical. When I first arrived at the meeting, I was surprised to find that two directors whom I had already interviewed were there. It was then that I began to see the community aspect of social organizations emerge. Indeed, many of the organizations I talked to discussed the great benefit of working “*en red*,” or within a network. Florencia, the founder and director of Déjelos Venir Adentro, a project that brings play programs into schools and community centers, commented that it “would be foolish to try to do this alone ... it's a group effort, you know?” Most other directors shared her sentiment, telling of the importance of solidarity in this line of work.

However, despite working with similar communities and social problems, not all social organizations are in contact with each other, nor do they seek the solidarity of working in partnership. VIDA and Voluntario Internacional, while working in partnership with local *comedores* and community centers, do not seek mutual support with similar organizations. I found this to be a major setback of these organizations: they are missing out on the practical assistance and support of similar organizations, as well as the sense of community and shared responsibility that comes from engaging in common networks.

It seemed that most organizations could seek to be involved in more partnered initiatives. Those who claimed the importance of working in network often did not mention the issue further or identify specific relationships, and one director even offered me the idea that there is actually a certain territoriality that works against networking among similar organizations. This director explained that there are known and respected “territories” of social organizations, discouraging any other organization from starting projects in the same area. He had been discussing his own organization's projects and, mentioning a certain

outer-lying region, said that there was great need in that part of the province, but that he did not go there. This was because, he said, there were already other NGOs with projects in the area, and “what right does another organization have to go there, too?” This idea of having distinct territories among organizations is counterintuitive, as it seems that social organizations should work to be more integrated rather than less; they should view their goals as being more aligned than different or opposing. The organizations that work together do not seem to share Andrés’ sentiment about territorial organizations, instead viewing their mission as a piece of a larger structure of aid and change. Through working together in networks rather than seeking to becoming less united and more territory-centered, small organizations can find support for their individual projects.

Funding

As I conducted interviews with the directors of social organizations, I found my questions regarding funding to be the most polarizing; the answers I received were the most interesting and revealing aspects of the interviews. While the directors answered with a range of emotionality and transparency, most showed a consistent trend in financial source: donations from individuals and business, volunteer contributions/fees, and government grants were the most common forms of funding. However, two organizations stood out as exceptional cases.

The most thought-provoking – albeit dissatisfying – answer regarding funding came from Filomena of Alianza de las Madres del Barrio San Rafael, a small community-based initiative founded by women of San Rafael, a neighborhood of LaFerrere. Her answer stands out not because it reveals any different source of money than the others, but rather because of its lack of logic. Filomena concurrently states that the association receives “no aid ... from anyone or any place;” that it receives clothing from a local *padrino* (patron, or benefactor) church; and that there is a subsidy (for an undisclosed amount of money) that is covered by an anonymous donor. At the same time, I also know from my own experience with the organization that, just prior to my starting as coordinator of the activity site in LaFerrere, five wooden tables were given to Alianza for use in the children’s activities by the municipal government. Also, VIDA, with whom I was connected to Filomena in the first place, not only provides after-school support for the children, but also *merienda* twice weekly, birthday parties monthly – replete with milk, cake, cookies and gifts –, and shoes and school supplies yearly. Her claim of having “no help” seems limited, and disregards several contradictory facts. This is not to discredit Filomena’s feelings of being at a disadvantage, nor to imply that she is wrong to want additional funding to be able to provide more activities and projects for her community – that is not at all my intention. Rather, her response made me realize that it is the nature of all social organizations to feel a certain monetary sparsity, and perspective is a necessity in assessing actual situations.

The second exemplary answer came from Santiago at Fundación Las Aulas, an organization that works on a macro-level across the country to promote education and healthy learning environments. The primary source for all of Aula’s projects and efforts with schools and the children come from private individual donors and sponsoring businesses – a typical response. Yet, how they fund organizational costs was a complete surprise. Their revenue comes from a parking lot. In the center of the city, ideally located near offices and shopping centers, a small piece of property is owned by the organization and has been turned into a profit-yielding parking lot. This provides a profit large enough to have 50 percent maintain the lot and the other 50 percent pay the office’s rent, electricity, and the salaries of the four paid employees. Creative solutions like these are straightforward, and they

certainly relieve the organization the stress of needing to pay the necessary bills of utilities and rent, as well as the awkwardness of having to deduct this from donations intended for the organization's projects. Similar projects include monthly or yearly benefit events: be it a concert, a potluck meal, or even a talent show or musical put on by the kids, these events are a great way for organizations to raise money for their projects, while at the same time encouraging community awareness and support of a specific cause.

Most organizations report receiving little to no financial support from the government. However, many also claim the government as a source of *some* assistance. Fundación Déjelos Venir Adentro has received monetary support from the municipal government for two years. "Well, three technically," Florencia, the director, says with a laugh, "but with how slow the government is ... thank God we're not a comedor – think if we were trying to feed people, yet still on the state's schedule! ... I don't know how they do it." The money Déjelos Venir Adentro receives is *por proyecto*, or "by the project," and not a recurring monthly subsidy. This system works well, says Florencia, whose only complaint is that sometimes the inability of the state to be flexible can be frustrating. But, she says, "it is good that they keep controls on how the money is spent. It is their money, and they should do that." The only time this inflexibility became an issue was when they received \$3000 from the state to buy toys, and then received a physical donation of \$5000 in toys. Florencia presented a petition asking to be able to put the money towards something else the organization needed at the time – "it's not like I wanted to buy cookies or take everyone in the office on vacation or anything!" – but was turned down, and had to buy still more toys, "that just sat on the shelves for almost a year ... it was senseless!"

Those who receive neither subsidies nor *por proyecto* grants claim no interest in receiving government money at all. Rosa of VIDA says that once one accepts government money, there begins to be an obligation to do more and more of what the state wants – the organization loses its autonomy and ability to pursue its own priorities freely. She, and those of other organizations with no government funds, are all proud to work completely separate from the state.

Perspectives on Government

Not surprisingly, I found that organizational attitudes toward the state paralleled the presence or absence of state funding. Two directors of organizations who spoke vehemently of the positivity of the current government receive – or have received in the past – grants *por proyecto* from the municipal, provincial, or national government. When asked of the possibility of government corruption through state officials providing poverty aid programs with electoral ends, one admits that there may be that issue, yet says, "... I don't care why the government puts in money ... even if it is just when there is an election ... if it gets to a kid, it's fine." The second replies to the same question with a quick, "Who told you that? Did somebody say that that is how it works?" However, while he balks at the idea of criticizing the government, he also admits that his organization does not have any connection with the state. Continuing on, he says:

We don't have even one ... not even one direct link with any state network, nor a problem with having one ... it's ... it's necessary to have a ... to be present ... no?... we don't have an anti-state position. At all. Nor do we have a relationship. At all. But it doesn't seem to me to be very mature to have an anti-state position ... or anti-government – it does nothing (*no sirve nada, eso, nada*).

For many, there seems to be a direct connection between opinion of the government and organizational access to government aid. As the head of an organization heavily funded with government subsidies, the director of Asociación La Madrugada by no means criticizes government actions. He is very pro-government, because his organization benefits from government money made available to it. At the same time, he does not consider himself nor his organization to be puppets of the government. While he recognizes that governments may have ulterior motives in how and to whom they give aid, he finds that this fact is inconsequential if the money indeed reaches a worthy project. He also agrees with the current guidelines of government grants, that the state should dictate how its money is spent. Others, though, like Rosa of VIDA, would say he is “in the state’s pocket” for this belief and its implicit effects on his organization.

With less emotion and showing a lack of unquestioning support of state practices, directors of both Fundación Déjelos Venir Adentro and Asociación Crecer speak with a conservative pragmatism towards the government and its relationship to society. It should be noted, too, that both receive periodic governmental *por proyecto* grants for their organizations. From Déjelos Venir Adentro, Florencia speaks with great disgust of the state-provided assistance programs, saying that government programs which simply give money or necessary goods to poor people are not helping or changing anything and, worse, “they are not making the person decent ... they are not treated as worthwhile: it is degrading for these people.” She goes on to say that those who really have needs are receiving nothing and are in the same position as they were five years ago - “and, with all of these supposedly wonderful changes of the economy, if they are the same, then they are worse.” She calls for the government to “dignify” its poorest population, not simply keep it where it is through meaningless *asistencia*, or assistance, programs.

Marcela, as a former state employee and current director of Asociación Crecer, provides another perspective of the government and its role in social welfare. Trained as a sociologist, she began her career by working for the state. Unsatisfied with the “government pace”, though, she left public office work and found herself spending her free time volunteering at Asociación Crecer. She loved it, and was gradually promoted to her present role as director. Like Florencia, Marcela talks of her hope in the goodness of the state, and believes that many of its efforts are not ill-founded. However, she notes that often the message of the government’s programs are good, “yet they don’t do what they say.” Additionally, she sees that its short-sightedness poses a hindrance to efficacy; the government needs to have a more long-term vision as it moves forward with planning and programs, “thinking of future generations ... they are just thinking of today, and not tomorrow.” She, too, believes that the state should aim at projects beyond simple assistance programs to effect real change.

For the most part, I found that the non-governmental social organizations of Buenos Aires that were committed to offering aid to the poorest and most vulnerable populations of the city did not see themselves as a replacement for the government. They see value in the state, and its programs, be they limited or even under-achieving. However, they do not see non-governmental projects as undermining the actions of the government. Rather, the directors of these programs focus on the government’s recent trends toward social spending, and call for further actions. They recognize that there is a large deficiency, and even criticize some of the state’s techniques and methods, yet most are hopeful that the government will continue to grow into the role of an effective social actor in Argentina.

Underlying Themes

While my interviews gave me much to compare across the organizations in measurable ways, I was also constantly observing nuanced, less tangible trends among the nonprofits and in the broader “culture of aid” in general. The following sections detail some of these issues, and how they relate to the ability of social organizations to effectively be actors of change.

Poverty Tourism

At the beginning of each orientation session with new volunteers at VIDA, I first would introduce myself by telling them who I am, how I came to be working for the organization, and about my project and interest in themes of poverty and inequality. I would then ask the group to introduce themselves and describe how and why each was there seeking a volunteer experience. The answers I received varied only slightly among the nearly 250 volunteers that I talked to over my five months as orientation leader. Most frequently, I would hear the phrases “I just want to *help*,” “I want to *give back*,” and “I wanted to see the *other side* of Argentina” as the reason an individual sought VIDA out during their spring break, study abroad semester, or gap year.

The idea of “help” is one of the most troubling issues I found as I worked with VIDA and interviewed other aid organizations. It is a word that is simultaneously complex and overly simplistic. So frequently used, its meaning has become assumed knowledge, yet few have truly defined it. At first glance, one might say that “help” is a term often misused. However, having never truly received a universal definition in this context, it is more true that it is simply *overused*. It is a cliché term that, presumably, denotes a humanitarian good will. “Help” implies an identified and specific need for which a solution is known, or perhaps is being evaluated and researched. Ideally, it indicates that efforts being made are positive; that they have been thought out and found to be truly beneficial to those receiving the aid. However, at its core is a tacit implication is that there be a well-off individual or group who *helps*, and a less fortunate one who *is helped*.

One of the largest drawbacks of organizations like VIDA and Voluntario Internacional is that, because they tend to deal mostly with foreigners, they are most likely to have volunteers coming prepared with only a tourist mentality. And, with a majority of international volunteers – all desiring to “help” – there is a blurred line as to what is effective aid, and what is merely a new form of tourism. There are those who blatantly state that curiosity is, in part, their goal of volunteering with VIDA: to see “the other side.” However, I believe that there are far more that fall into this category than willingly admit it. Often, these organizations that attract a high volume of foreign volunteers tow a thin line between Volunteerism and Poverty Tourism.

Organizations whose function is to connect willing volunteers with local organizations, run the greatest risk of falling into a poverty tourism model. These are businesses that act as brokers between local humanitarian projects and foreigners seeking a “complete volunteer experience.” Many of their volunteers are short-term students or travelers with little interest or ability to become deeply involved in the programs to which they are assigned, often choosing to rotate between multiple project locations, to “sample.” This leads often to a skewed image of reality: they get a only a brief and often misinformed idea of who the poor people are, what skills and abilities they have, and what real aid or development might look like.

There are several potential downfalls of this strategy. The most disconcerting is that it creates a market based on the fact that poor populations exist. There is a slippery slope from being an objective third party willing to connect individuals with volunteer opportunities and running a poverty tourism organization through which the poor feel unnecessarily used and minimally aided. This is an obstacle to avoid in all programs, though I found it was a potential hazard especially with organizations that dealt primarily with foreign volunteers. They exist because poverty exists, and they thrive off of people who want to “see poverty.”

During my time at VIDA, I had two contrasting experiences with American university student groups that example well the difference between legitimate help and poverty tourism. The first group were students from an expensive state university in New York, studying for a semester in Buenos Aires at their sister school. The university’s local office requested one day of volunteering for 16 of their students, arranging to donate a sum of money for a day-long excursion for their students. We picked the students up from their posh university building in a wealthy subsection of the city on a Saturday and privately bused them to Laferrere. Another intern and I conducted a mini-orientation on the ride which, for many of the students, was the first they had heard of Argentina’s specific poverty issues. The day was spent doing none of our normal activities; instead, we played games, made crafts, and ate hamburgers that the university’s donation had bought. Throughout the day, many of the students interacted with only each other rather than with the kids, speaking in English about the clothes of the women, the condition of the courtyard and street, and even the lack of salad dressing. All day, it seemed that these “volunteers” could only view the day as about them: this was a piece of *their* experience, a day to see something new and different, much like going to a museum or zoo as a field trip. As it was *my site* we had taken the group to, I especially felt as if I – and VIDA – had sold out our kids by exhibiting them to these wealthy Americans.

The second group, from Chicago, was by all appearances a group expecting the same kind of experience that the group from New York had wanted. However, it was astoundingly different. The students were a part of a campus student group that decided to take an alternative spring break and had contacted VIDA months in advance to see if they could partner with us to do a week of service. Knowing they only had six volunteer days before returning to the United States, the group asked not to do the regular volunteering, but rather any “special projects” that we needed accomplished at the various sites. For six days, this group of twenty-four American university students donated their time and money to manual labor projects that needed to be done. We built shelves, moved sand and bricks, and painted. Only on two of the days did the students have any contact with the kids, and both times were for short activities that were as much a treat for the students as for our kids, planned into the normal structure of the kids’ activities, but enhanced by the added volunteers’ energy. Unlike the first group, these students desired to see their time and money put to use in ways that would be significant for the children and the community rather than personal enjoyment.

In the cases of the villa-based community centers that I interviewed, it is clear that volunteers – even internationals – are seen as a resources, yet without the goal of the organization becoming lost in facilitating them. In organizations like Voluntario Internacional, though, the organization is centered not around the project, but rather around the volunteer: the fact that the local organizations – and the poverty they serve – *exist* is necessary for Voluntario Internacional’s success. Organizations like VIDA fall somewhere between the

extremes of being a local organization and being a business for foreigners. Of course, it still has its own projects, and its motivation today is not far from Rosa's original intent. Organizations, then, differ in how they approach volunteers: they either create tourist experiences for foreigners, or they facilitate a volunteer's desire to be made useful, providing meaningful spaces which can utilize the time, effort, or money given. Poverty Tourism stems from an organization's focus on the volunteer and their experience rather than on the project itself. Often this distinction comes at the cost of the community being "helped" – whether by feeling used, or by simply not being helped to any noteworthy extent, these local communities are not benefited by Poverty Tourism.

Decreasing Marginalization vs. Poverty Alleviation

"There is a social problem far worse than poverty, *mi amor*, and it is called marginalization," Rosa, the founder and director of VIDA, said to me one evening. "It's like the trash. People need to think ... but they don't think of what they throw away, they just put it all in there. And those who come after ... the *cartoneros* ... they'll cut themselves on a tin or broken glass that someone has put into a bag without thought."

The problem she spoke is an idea that is common to many of the organizations with whom I spoke. *Alleviating poverty* is not their primary goal: rather, they are *fighting marginalization*. It is not merely because a child is poor that she does not finish secondary school; it is the entire social construct into which she has been built. From the distinction between a villa and a *barrio*, or neighborhood, of the city to the fear and assumed danger of a villero, culture has built a wall between the "proper" society and city and the "Other." VIDA, along with several other organizations, sees its primary function not as fighting the beast of poverty; rather, the devil of marginalization. It is marginalization which hinders children from knowing their own city; which causes them to grow up believing in their own nature as the "outsider", which allows a foreigner to remain uneducated and unconcerned with issues beyond their narrow range of vision.

The very structure of the system now not only supports, but *demand*s the existence of these shantytown communities and their "other" population. There is no foundation in place that leads to the possibility of an exit; even systems like education are not provided in a way that will make a notable difference for these children. "One could easily argue that their educational experiences are not intended to and cannot prepare [them] to function in the same society and the same economy." Social organizations, then, build themselves to be the agents that bring these communities – beginning with children – up out of the "otherness" that exists between the "invisible wall of economic redundancy, educational exclusion, state abandonment and sustained stigmatization [that] has been erected."

For Rosa, the fight against marginalization manifests in her ability to bring together cultures and worlds: by introducing foreign volunteers to *villero* children, she is both showing the volunteer a world of poverty they may never have seen, as well as giving the child a glimpse of a world beyond their own – one of education and of travel. Her birthday parties and play days are envisioned as days to "make the child feel as any other child might." Other organizations focus on a child's creative nature through art and music programs to target the manifestation of marginalization. By encouraging a child to produce art and to let themselves be creative, they help that child see her own ability and have a place to express her feelings. In this way, if marginalization is the "averted gaze" of the government, then the actions and projects of these social organizations are a firm redirection of regard.

Relationships

For organizations aimed at minimizing marginalization, and especially those that do so through work specifically with children, building real and meaningful relationships is one of the most important aspects of any project. Relationships that are built between short-term volunteers and longer-term staff, between volunteers and kids, and even between community members themselves increase not only the likelihood of success of the organization but also of any community initiatives and development. For any meaningful change to take place within a community, there needs to be strong relationships on multiple levels.

To say that relationships are paramount to structural change may seem a quixotic approach to problems as complex as poverty and intense social marginalization, an idealistic cover of more pragmatic issues. Indeed it was not—by any stretch—the hypothesis I had set out to prove. However, my own project underwent a gradual shift in approach. While rooted academically in the political and economic history of Argentina's poverty, I began to insert myself relationally into the community intuitively, adjusting my own actions – and, later, aspects of VIDA's systematic approach at my site – based on the reactions and results of the kids that I had begun to know well. Then, using this as a baseline from which I saw all other organizations, I started to see the great parallel between my own informal experience, and the experiences of all organizations: relationships are key to a healthy and effective social organization.

In my time at VIDA, the pattern that I consistently saw repeated by foreign volunteers was the lack of a big picture. The interns who stayed for long periods of time would become so internally-focused, so increasingly preoccupied with the daily tasks of running the office, that they would frequently forget about the children for whom the work was done. Florencia of Déjelos Venir Adrento spoke to this tendency when she said that “you always have to stay connected to the kids, or you'll forget what you're doing.” On a higher organizational level, the trend was consistent: many social organizations spend more time recruiting more volunteers – growing the *organization* – than they do seeking ways to improve the services they provide to *people*. Their interests shift, becoming more about gaining volunteers and recognition and less about interacting with marginalized communities and meeting their needs.

It is through developing a strong base of trust that any other efforts may be realized. For this reason, organizations who focus their outreach efforts on securing only volunteers run the risk of never fully becoming established in their target communities because of their volunteers' transiency. As a foreigner myself, I cannot say that I truly integrated into Laferrere in the six months that I was the site's coordinator; although I worked with the kids longer than any other VIDA volunteer ever had, I was still temporary, in the long-run. However, for six months, I made it my goal to accomplish just one thing: to let the children learn to trust in accountability. I was given the responsibility of Laferrere because nobody else wanted it. “The kids are bad,” I was told by other interns who had gone for a week or two. What I found, though, was that the kids simply needed relationships: someone to whom they must be accountable, and who would also show that same accountability to them.

One day in April, about a month into my time at Laferrere, I was playing a game of modified hide-and-seek with some of my kids outside. The object of the game is for the player who is “it” to either tag the others, having found them in hiding, or hit the “home-base” wall and called out the names of those racing to safety, automatically getting them “out.” Having been in hiding for awhile, Ximena – a girl with whom I had taken cover behind a car – and I decided to make a run for Home Base. Fernando, who was “it” that round, saw us coming, though, and raced to the wall, beating us squarely. He proudly slapped the

wall with his hand, proclaiming “*pica Ximena y pica la de VIDA* – Ximena is out and the girl from VIDA is out.” I paused, then slapped the wall myself, declaring “No, I’m not.” Fernando looked at me, dumbfounded – “But I said your name: you’re out.” “No, you said ‘*La de VIDA*,’ – that’s not a name. I’ve been here one month, I’ll be here four more, it’s time you know who I am. You are Fernando, you are in grade five, you pretend you only know math up to multiplication, but you can really do division, too. I know you, you should know me by now, too.” Everyone who had been playing were gathered around us, staring at me in astonishment, and then the game simply resumed.

The next week, all of the children – and even some parents – called me Elisabeth. Within two weeks, they had shortened it to Eli. By June, when I had seven children screaming my nickname from various corners of the courtyard – all requiring my immediate and absolute attention – I almost regretted taking this first step of familiarity. In all actuality, though, the level to which my kids at Laferrere came to count on my presence was an acknowledgement of how important personal relationships are. Volunteers soon came to know Laferrere not for its “bad” kids, but the for the most diligent students and polite children – who actually took the time to greet each volunteer and learn his or her name.

One of the unifying factors of the social organizations I worked with is that they build relationships. Whether through play, school support, or the arts, they bring children into relationships and focus on developing an interpersonal skill set – they are building the child’s ability to relate and to be in a social setting. Organizations that focus on the relationship-building aspect of their projects are ensuring its effectiveness. Only through strong relationships can an organization both last in a community and have its projects be successful for the children’s development.

Conclusion

These three underlying issues are perhaps the most critical to understanding social development strategies not only in Buenos Aires, but also around the world. The concept of poverty alleviation versus marginalization shakes the very foundation of how the poor are viewed: not as a helpless “Other,” but rather as an equal being lacking equal opportunity. Similarly, poverty tourism exists as a form of “Aid Lite,” giving foreigners a feeling of self-satisfaction and goodwill, while exploiting the poor with whom they are in contact. And finally, recognizing the necessity of building relationships and longterm accountability and trust in a community is essential to implementing programs that will effect great change, though it may hurt the pride of those whose methods must be changed. At the root of these three ideas is a deep lack of understanding and incredibly simplistic view of “what the problem is.” This mentality is one that leaves the vulnerable communities disempowered, with the incoming actors of aid acting more as intruders; crippling rather than enabling positive change.

The complexity of poverty and social inequality embedded in structural violence cannot and will not be sorted out by any one government program, social organization, or academic researcher. However, a dialogue – one that is based in and supported by practical knowledge and experience – needs to begin about how to approach these deeply troubling realities. In my full thesis, I submitted one proposal for a project that would pull together specific issues I had noted as key – such as funding sources and project location – as well as addressing the deeper issues of developing strong relationships, empowering a community to be its own biggest advocate and actor of change. Only through more discourse, joining actors on all levels of this social dilemma, will a solution be made more attainable.

Each of the twelve interviewed organizations were given a complete introduction in the original version of this thesis. For the purpose of this article, only the full description of VIDA Argentina is included; the others are used as comparative models, and detailed only to the extent needed to discuss a given idea or trend. Names of organizations and individuals have been changed.

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