

A missing link in understanding Party policy change? Conservative Party international volunteering projects and UK development policy (2007–2017)

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A missing link in understanding party policy change?

Conservative Party international volunteering projects and UK development policy (2007-
2017)

Abstract

This paper analyses the rationale for and impacts of Conservative Party overseas volunteering projects from 2007 to 2017. Using interview data and participant observation, we uncover aims of project founders and explore impacts of volunteering on Party members and policy. We make three substantial contributions. The first focuses on the survival of Conservative Party modernisation strategies launched under David Cameron. Support for development, particularly Party pledges to spend 0.7% of UK GNI on aid, are poorly explained by existing research. We argue that a focus on volunteering helps explain the survival of this commitment. Second, we argue that volunteering experience may support sustained party policy change by enhancing ‘issue ownership’. Our final contribution is providing the first analysis of political parties as development-volunteer sending communities. Through new data and distinctive contributions, we demonstrate that understanding party-supported volunteering promotes improved explanations of party modernisation persistence and policy change.

Introduction

This paper explores a neglected aspect of Conservative Party activity which began under the leadership of David Cameron: Party-supported international development volunteering. Since 2007, over 300 volunteers, including MPs, staff, prospective party candidates, Councillors

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and activists, have participated in short overseas volunteering trips. The flagship project is Umubano, an annual visit to Rwanda supporting projects across sectors including health, education and business. Engagement with international development is often cited as evidence of Party modernisation, part of an effort to ‘detoxify’ ‘the ‘nasty Party’ (Heppell and Seawright, 2012: 227). We find senior Party representatives view Umubano as an important component in this process, but also argue it had wider and longer term consequences than anticipated, for the Party and its engagement with development as a policy issue. We do not claim that volunteering leads automatically to unqualified support for aid or the 0.7% target; instead that for some volunteering has become a core part of how they describe and perform their political identity. Sustained Party commitment to volunteering has helped bring development into the mainstream of party identity. This paper provides unique insight into Party-supported overseas volunteering, presenting the first systematic research into its origins and impacts. Using new empirical data from interviews and participant observation, it addresses three main questions: Why did senior Party figures establish and support Umubano; does knowing more about personal and Party impacts of Umubano improve our understanding of the Conservative Party’s support for development and the totemic 0.7% target; and, finally, what insight does this research offer for those seeking to understand processes and survival of party position changes, in this case associated with party modernisation?

To address these questions we use three sources of evidence. First, between April and November 2017 we conducted 38 interviews with former volunteers. These are alumni of Projects Umubano and Maja, with many having participated in more than one trip. Interviewees included 18 current or former MPs, five current or former Councillors, three members of the House of Lords and two MEPs. Secondly, participant observation was conducted by one researcher during the 2017 Project Umubano programme in Rwanda,

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during which she participated as an English tutor for Rwandan school-based mentors.¹ Her involvement as a volunteer included attending pre-departure briefing events at Party Headquarters and a post-volunteering reunion at the 2017 Party Conference. This provided opportunities to speak with volunteers before, during and after the visit, including those not previously interviewed. Participants were made aware of the researcher's presence, in writing, before the trip. No data is attributed to any individual without written permission. The final category of evidence comprises reports, testimony and other materials, including: volunteer accounts of their experiences, including in Party affiliated outlets (e.g. ConservativeHome website); Hansard parliamentary debates records; and parliamentary voting and select committee attendance records. The project underwent full ethical review by a University of Birmingham ethical review committee. All interviewees gave informed written consent to participate; they were offered the option of remaining anonymous, which some accepted, and were informed of their right to withdraw from the research without penalty.

Before continuing it is necessary to highlight an important characteristic of our data. Our argument is supported primarily by data gathered from a self-selecting group: those who developed, participated in, and promoted volunteering. These individuals possess unique knowledge of the volunteering projects and have not previously been asked about this activity. They are, unsurprisingly, predisposed to view the projects in a positive light, and may seek to overstate volunteering's profile and effects on the Party. We have sought to mitigate this by diversifying our respondent pool beyond veteran multi-trip volunteers. We interviewed volunteers from the early years of the project, including those who participated once or twice as well as those who took part more often. We also interviewed first time volunteers in 2017, interacting with them through participant observation of preparation meetings, volunteering, and post-return reunion, to see whether veteran volunteers' views

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were echoed or challenged by those who were newly involved and carried less preconceptions. We also sought independent corroboration of volunteers' claims. From reviewing contemporaneous documents, including contributions to Parliamentary debates, voting records and reports of constituency activities such as talks at schools and churches, we were able to verify volunteers' claims to be sharing their experiences publicly and in pursuit of specific policy or public engagement aims. The data we present must be recognised for what it is, insights from supporters of the activity we are seeking to understand. Our triangulation of this data does however provide confidence; though volunteers' claims may be overtly positive and simplistic at times they do stand up to scrutiny.

The paper proceeds in four sections. The first summarises relevant research on development volunteering. We highlight three elements: the research gap on political party-supported volunteering; the significant impacts volunteering is argued to have on individuals and sending organisations; and a tendency to rely on anecdotal and self-reported data to evidence impacts. Section two reviews literature on Conservative Party modernisation, considering how engagement with development, and specifically overseas volunteering, has been presented within a narrative of changing Party identity, projected internally within the Party and externally to the UK public. This section also reflects on how party modernisation links to processes of policy change, considering how volunteering fits into existing models of policy change. Section three describes Project Umubano. Section four presents our findings. It explores aims of Umubano founders and organisers, considering how these were articulated in relation to wider programmes of Party modernisation and brand detoxification, linking the activity to narratives of Party change discussed in section two. It continues by exploring how volunteering helped develop issue ownership on international development, by individual Party members and the internal networks formed through volunteering. Finally, we consider to what extent volunteering can explain change in Party position on development. The

conclusion reflects on implications for scholars in three fields: development volunteering; party modernisation; and policy change. We suggest that Party-supported volunteering has two main legacies: building and consolidating networks within the Party focused on international development; and engendering varying levels of volunteer commitment to personal and national involvement in development. We find these effects are tangible and sustained, and suggest that the potential of exposure-based activities in supporting shifts in party policy warrants further research.

1. Party-supported overseas volunteering – motives and impacts

There is no published research into what motivates political parties to encourage their members to engage in development volunteering. However, if we consider the Conservative Party a ‘sending community’ – an institution, private enterprise or membership organisation encouraging volunteering – then it can be analysed by drawing upon research into the motives of similar communities. The most relevant research in this field focuses on companies running employer-supported volunteering (ESV) initiatives. ESV activities are diverse, varying in size, function and rationale. They range from brief one-off activities to sustained multi-year engagements. Rochester et al. (2010) contend that there are many motivations for employers encouraging volunteering. For example, it is shown to enhance employees experience, skills and team-working ability, and is believed to bring host organisation new kinds of expertise (for similar assessments, see Booth et al., 2009; de Gilder et al., 2005; Muthari et al., 2009; Sherraden et al., 2008).

In exploring individual development volunteer motivation, there is again little research on members of political parties. However, there is considerable research into motives of

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international volunteers in general. Rehberg (2005: 113) suggests three motivation categories. The first is 'achieving something positive for others', signalling altruism to help those perceived to be in need. The second category, 'quest for the new', includes motives such as experiencing new cultures, meeting new people and getting away from daily routines. The third, 'quest for oneself', includes developing a stronger CV and transferrable skills, and discovering or challenging one's personal limits.² There is also research ranking the importance of different motivations. Meneghini (2016), for example, suggests that motivations relating to altruistic and humanitarian values are more important for volunteers than career enhancement. Both sending communities and individuals, then, identify both intrinsic and extrinsic motives for volunteering.

Research on the impact of volunteering on volunteers is substantial, but again neglects political parties and their members. For ESV, a recent review article allocates impacts to three categories: 1) personal outcomes, 2) work behaviour and 3) external perceptions (Rodell et al., 2015). For personal outcomes, studies suggest that volunteering promotes a sense of accomplishment and personal growth (Booth et al., 2009; Caligiura et al., 2013; Mojza et al., 2011). Research on work behaviour indicates that volunteering contributes to improved core task performance and decreases counterproductive behaviour (de Gilder et al., 2005; Jones, 2010; Rodell, 2013). A company's reputation may also improve through ESV (de Gilder et al., 2005). Beyond ESV literature, research suggests international volunteering supports more nuanced understandings of global issues and support for development aid within the sending community (Palacios, 2010; Plewes and Stuart, 2007; Sherraden et al., 2008).

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Beyond motives and sending community impacts, there is considerable research on how individuals are affected by their experience. These studies mainly rely on self-reported data, typically from interviews and/or questionnaires. Volunteers report personal, social and professional development, including of transferrable skills, and a resulting perception of improved employment prospects. Other impacts include increased appreciation of other cultures, heightened consciousness of the importance of global justice, increased civic participation and commitment to international development (Bentall et al., 2010; CIDA, 2005; Clark and Lewis, 2017; DfID, 2013; Jones, 2005; Lough et al., 2009; Machin, 2008; Tiessen and Heron, 2012). Some studies use quasi-experimental design or attempt to triangulate impact on volunteers (Lough et al., 2014; Palacios, 2010; Ver Beek, 2006). The value of such triangulation is illustrated by Ver Beek (2006), who finds discrepancies between volunteers' accounts of impacts and their observable behaviour.

This brief review demonstrates that sending communities anticipate positive benefits for both individual and organisation. It also indicates that impacts are difficult to measure; there may be inconsistency between volunteer reported impacts and observable behaviour. These findings have implications for how we seek to understand and categorise motivations of the Conservative Party as a sending community, and for how we identify and evaluate impacts on the volunteer and Party. To understand the motivations of this particular sending community we must first put the decision to establish Umubano into context. In the following section we therefore establish how international development fits into wider processes of Conservative Party modernisation and policy change, focusing on the tenure of David Cameron (2005-2016), and acknowledging the often-overlooked legacy of Michael Howard (2003-2005).

2. International Development and Party modernisation

Byrne, Foster and Kerr argue, following Laclau (1996), that ‘modernisation has come to be imbued with such a variety of different meanings that it could be said to have acquired the status of an ‘empty signifier’’ (2012: 18). Nevertheless, they suggest claims to be carrying out party modernisation remain a useful way for party leaders to distance themselves and the party under their leadership from previous iterations (2012: 21). Similarly, reviewing changes to British Conservatism since 1945, Denham and O’Hara (2007) emphasise lack of consensus among British Conservatives as to what modernisation means. They suggest it captures changes to the Party undertaken during periods of opposition, but caution that the precise ‘nature of modernisation’ varies in different opposition periods (2007: 167). Dommett (2015) seeks to develop the modernisation concept, focusing on macro, meso and micro level change. Crucially she also proposes that change alone is insufficient: Modernisation must make a clear link between *modern conditions* and concrete change (2015: 250, emphasis added). International development as a policy issue fits these criteria, and is one where scholars of Conservatism suggest significant and lasting change to Party policy and attitudes of Conservative MPs is observable (Heppell and Lightfoot, 2012; Heppell et al., 2017).

International development as a policy issue does not fit easily into frameworks for explaining party policy change. Research into what drives parties to take up a new policy area in campaigning, particularly in the lead up to elections, tends to focus on how that issue resonates with the median voter in the whole electorate or the median voter within the party (Ezrow et al., 2010; Schumacher, et al., 2013). Such research usually focuses on whether and how often issues are mentioned in party manifestoes as a proxy for party engagement (Hobolt and de Vries, 2015; Spoon and Kluver, 2014). Further studies have explored how parties campaign on issues on which they are already judged competent and credible by the electorate (emphasising their ‘issue ownership’), or seek to develop ownership on an issue where they may have little prior record, termed ‘issue entrepreneurship’ or ‘issue trespass’

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(Budge and Farlie, 1983; Damore, 2004; Green and Hobolt, 2008). Following the landslide election victory and the creation of a Department for International Development (DfID) in 1997, Labour owned international development as a policy issue. However, subsequent years saw increasing issue trespass and entrepreneurship, as the Conservative Party sought to respond to the growing profile of development with voters and demonstrate their issue competence.

By the mid-2000s the UK had established a leadership role in international development ([reference removed for anonymity]; Vines, 2011). In focusing the 2005 G8 summit at Gleneagles on development, debt reduction, and climate change, and supporting Make Poverty History and endorsing Live8, Blair and Brown sought to enlist the British public in their development mission (see Honeyman, 2011: 90; Payne, 2006). The mass movements generated by Make Poverty History and Live8 clearly caught the imagination of the British public. This is evidenced by the DfID-funded Public Perceptions of Poverty research programme, which found that the share of the public ‘very concerned’ about ‘poverty in poor countries’ increased in the early 2000s, peaking in 2005 at 32% (Darnton, 2006: 8). Follow-up research verifies this trend, with levels of concern peaking in 2005 then dropping steadily to 24% in 2010. Despite this decline, public concern remained well above the pre-millennium level of 17% ‘very concerned’, illustrating continued issue salience (Darnton and Kirk, 2011: 16). The changing UK role in international development and public responses to Make Poverty History and the Indian Ocean Boxing Day tsunami (2004) raised the profile of humanitarian and development assistance, encouraging Conservative Party engagement with development as a policy issue.

This shift began in earnest under Michael Howard. Reflecting on the response to the Boxing Day tsunami, Howard spoke of the generosity of British people (Howard, 2005a). He linked

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disaster response to ‘conservative values’ – charity, and compassion for those in need. In a keynote speech, he suggested the values necessary to tackle world poverty were linked to the Conservative Party: ‘Trusting free enterprise; upholding the rule of law; accepting our moral duty to help those less fortunate’ (Howard, 2005b). Howard echoed Labour commitments to work towards a target of spending 0.7% of GNI on overseas development, pledging to increase UK aid by 20% by 2008 (Howard, 2005b). He also, however, signalled divergence from Labour, calling for greater UK control over aid distributed through the EU and for tackling waste and corruption. Engagement with international development was presented as a moral responsibility, fighting for ‘what we know is right’ (Howard, 2005a). This mirrored the claims made by Blair in 2001, who famously described ‘the state of Africa’ as a ‘scar on the conscience of the world’ (Guardian, 2001).

Succeeding Howard, Cameron continued to claim a connection between international development, global poverty reduction and Conservative values. He expressed personal and Party commitment to UK engagement with international development, pledging to work towards the 0.7% target. Working closely with Shadow Development Secretary Andrew Mitchell and Party Chairman Francis Maude, Cameron and his team also pursued policies designed to demonstrate a more compassionate side to the Party. Engagement with international development was a significant element of this modernisation effort, often cited alongside same-sex marriage, environmental policy and initiatives to increase diversity of Party election candidates (Dommett, 2015: 262, 263; Heppell and Seawright, 2012: 227). Embracing the UK leadership role in international development established under Labour was pragmatic (Heppell and Lightfoot, 2012), but it also fit with Cameron’s claims to be developing ‘One World Conservatism’ and, closer to home, his aspirations for a ‘Big Society’. The Big Society was intended as a unifying theme for the 2010 election, again signalling a clear break with past Party rhetoric. It emphasised communal action to address

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social challenges, celebrating volunteering and engaged citizenship and referencing social action projects by Conservative MPs in the UK and abroad. The concept failed to take root in the broader Party or resonate with the electorate (Dorey and Garnett, 2012). It nevertheless provides further evidence of the embedding of international development, particularly through volunteering, under Cameron.

Under Labour, international development became an area of UK strength, bringing influence and prestige on a global stage. Howard and Cameron had each worked to highlight links between a new approach to development and core Conservative values. In doing so, this plank of Party modernisation was rendered less vulnerable to retrenchment than others (see, for example, Carter and Clements, 2015 on environmental policy). One important way in which engagement with international development was embedded within the Party, and a network of future potential development advocates built, was through Party-supported volunteering projects. Modelled on UK social action projects that underpinned Cameron's vision of the Big Society, they continue to this day. Their role in embedding development support within the Party, in the face of significant challenges, is thus far unexamined. Given the impacts of international volunteering on individuals and sending communities discussed earlier, and the identification of international development as an area of party policy change and of concerted efforts to develop issue ownership, the connection between these phenomena merits further exploration.

3. International Social Action: Project Umubano (2007-2017)

Project Umubano was established in 2007 under Cameron. No other UK political party, then or since, has established a similar sustained international development volunteering project.³ Perhaps reflecting the high regard in which the Project is held within the Party, many

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individuals claim involvement in founding Umubano. There was however consensus among interviewees that Andrew Mitchell MP, then Shadow Secretary of State for International Development, was the driving force. Umubano was supported by then Party Chairman Francis Maude MP (May 2005-July 2007), and also later a successor Baroness Sayeeda Warsi (May 2010-September 2012). Umubano is a Kinyarwanda word which translates as friendship or co-operation. The first Umubano visit to Rwanda involved Conservative Party MPs, Councillors, staff and activists. The location was significant. Rwanda resonated in public imagination following the 1994 genocide, but was less burdened by British historical - imperial - engagement than, say, Zimbabwe or Kenya. For Umubano founders, it was ideal: a small, relatively safe state where volunteers could move freely. During the subsequent decade over 300 Party members participated in visits lasting 10 days to three weeks. Party donors subsidised the trips, with volunteers typically contributing £1500-£2000 each.

Volunteers undertook projects reflecting their professional expertise and skills. Medics supported health programmes in rural clinics and city hospitals, sharing expertise in general practice, dentistry, orthopaedic surgery, psychiatry, obstetrics and public health. Participants with business experience trained entrepreneurs in basic accounting, business plan development and marketing, while lawyers worked with Rwandan counterparts and media and communications specialists worked with journalists. In the early years, volunteers helped construct a community centre and cricket pitch. They have delivered sports coaching at schools, community centres and refugee camps. Many also participated in education programmes, working with Rwandan teachers to improve their English skills.

Volunteers stay in basic accommodation, divided between the capital and rural areas and coming together for some communal activities. Organisers incorporate experiences designed to introduce participants to Rwanda's history, especially the 1994 genocide. This includes visits to memorials, both Western-style formal memorials such as Gisozi, and sites where

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bodies of genocide victims are preserved in situ, as well as group viewings of films about genocide and meetings with survivors. Finally, the trips incorporate cultural events, including traditional dance, and volunteers visit markets and tourist attractions. These trips are thus short but intense, often providing volunteers' first experiences of visiting Africa, volunteering overseas, and visiting a country which experienced genocide.

Umubano is not the only overseas volunteering project established by the Party. Since the first Rwanda trip in 2007, visits to Burundi, Sierra Leone and Tanzania have been organised under the Umubano banner. In 2009, Baroness Warsi and former Party leader William Hague established Project Maja, which organised visits to Bangladesh, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Greece and Turkey. The changing location of Project Maja reflects its different goals to Umubano. Maja supports groups, mainly comprising MPs and MEPs, including representatives from other centre-right European parties, to engage with people living in difficult conditions, such as homeless communities in Athens or Syrian children in refugee camps in Turkey, to distribute humanitarian items or build and refurbish facilities. It focuses on exposure and sensitisation. It is not based on long-term engagement with one location or using volunteer skills to contribute to development to the same degree as Umubano, but its existence is further evidence that volunteering for development is embedded as a party-supported activity.

Project Umubano in Rwanda thus sits within a wider portfolio of overseas social action undertaken by the Conservative Party. It is however particularly important, and valuable from a research perspective, given its status as the first of its kind, the decade-long engagement it spawned, and the number and status of Party members involved.

4. Why did the Party support overseas social action?

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Our interviewees included two former Party Chairmen (Maude and Warsi), the primary architect of Umubano (Mitchell), individuals who had organised and led Umubano trips, including Stephen Crabb MP and Jeremy Lefroy MP, and others who had led project teams (e.g. business, parliamentary support). There was a high degree of consistency among interviewee responses when we queried the reasons for establishing Umubano in 2007. The responses can be categorised as two separate but linked aims: lending credence to claims of Party modernisation being projected within the Party and to the public; and building members' confidence and credibility to support a claim for Conservative ownership of international development as a policy issue. We will address each of these in turn.

Party modernisation

As discussed earlier, under Cameron the Conservative Party pursued modernisation and rebranding to improve their image with voters. This wider modernisation programme provided a banner under which new activities could be pursued, including those which challenged entrenched views – held within the Party and in the wider public – of the Party and its key policy areas of concern.

Former Party Chairmen Maude and Warsi both describe social action in this way, as an activity which provided concrete evidence of Party change. Maude suggested that Umubano helped show the electorate that the Party was engaged with issues the British public, especially younger voters, cared about and that they expected a prospective governing party to be concerned with.⁴ Following widespread public - particularly youth - engagement with Make Poverty History, he stated that any party seeking to appeal to a new generation of voters needed to set out its position, and speak credibly, on international development. Mitchell similarly noted that Labour had hitherto dominated the discussion on development in Parliament and public discourse; development was not regarded as Conservative

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‘territory.’⁵ He presented Umubano, along with the creation of ‘an authentically centre right view on development’, different from that of Labour, as crucial to establishing the Conservative Party’s ‘permission to be heard’ on development.⁶ Although these volunteering trips were short and, in the early years, quite limited in their contributions to development, Crabb argued that they were important in demonstrating that the Party was ‘not merely paying lip service to a popular policy position.’⁷

However, the objective of changing public perceptions through visible activity was not fully achieved. Since the inaugural visit the Conservative volunteering projects have not been widely publicised, and our interviews show that volunteers are sceptical that development volunteering could improve public perceptions of the Party. The first visit, in 2007, was, from a public relations standpoint, disastrous. Cameron’s visit to Project Umubano in Rwanda coincided with severe flooding in his UK constituency, sparking scathing news reports questioning his priorities (Kavanagh and Cowley, 2011: 81). When he gave a speech at the Rwandan Parliament, launching the Party’s ‘Kigali Deceleration on International Development’, there was a power-cut, during which Andrew Mitchell told new volunteers in a 2017 briefing event, his ‘career flashed before (his) eyes.’⁸ The critical UK media coverage ensured that Cameron did not attend subsequently and that future media engagement was carefully managed. Despite this experience, perhaps surprisingly, the volunteering projects continued.

When we asked about public perceptions of their volunteering, interviewees suggested that international aid was not a high priority for those who might vote Conservative, and that raising public awareness of their volunteering could be counter-productive. After participating in project Maja, Guy Opperman MP conducted a debate in his constituency on the Middle East and the 0.7% target. Evaluating the impact of the debate, he told us that it ‘gained me certain votes, but probably cost me more votes in some areas.’⁹ Our interviewees

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offered no evidence to suggest that volunteering translates into an advantage at local or national elections, and this partly explains the decision not to raise the profile of Party volunteering with the general public. Based on our interviews, we therefore suggest that while the projects continued to be presented as evidence of Party modernisation, this was increasingly aimed at an internal audience, within the Party in constituencies and Westminster, rather than a national audience.

Despite the negative media reporting of the inaugural Umubano trip, Maude maintained that Umubano was a success and that it had the effect they had hoped for: 'getting people exposed to life outside the comfort zone...you come back and you understand it in a completely different way'.¹⁰ Mitchell similarly told us that his personal primary aim had been met, Umubano had established: 'a core of people who had been to a poor country, formed their own views about what worked, and what didn't work in international development, and brought to the Conservative Party humanity, expertise and understanding of development issues.'¹¹ For Mitchell, demonstrating the modern outlook of the Party required more and better engagement with development as a policy issue, and this could only be achieved by embedding engagement with development within the Party, making it an issue on which Conservatives were confident and credible. Reflecting Dommet's earlier definition, modernisation here is change linked to modern conditions. For Mitchell and Cameron, as demonstrated by the latter's subsequent personal involvement in developing the Sustainable Development Goals, engaging with development was necessary for a modern Party with governing ambitions and designs on a global role for the UK.

To summarise, Umubano was clearly initially motivated by a desire to change perceptions of the Party amongst potential voters and to attract a new generation of members. It was about modernisation and detoxification. Our interviews reveal, however, that negative media coverage meant that this aim quickly had to be reconsidered. Given that this activity was not

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creating positive headlines, the architects of overseas social action faced a choice: abandon the experiment, or continue with it as a more inward-facing activity. In recounting the early years of Umubano, the founders argue that there was always an intention to create a lasting legacy and shift in attitude within the Party through volunteering, building on individual experiences and networks formed on this basis. It is however impossible to know whether this really was the aim at the outset or whether it was rather a commitment which evolved over time, due to the combination of a positive response to Conservative development volunteering within the party and the lukewarm reception outside of it.

Building 'issue ownership' through volunteering

As previously discussed, development volunteers often claim the experience has profound and lasting impacts on their views and actions. Through providing a platform that enabled development volunteering, the Party sought to capitalise on the affective experiences of such volunteering. It gave members interested in development considerable practical support to enable volunteering and permission to bring that transformative experience back and to use it to serve the Party. In short, it helped develop issue ownership on international development at the level of both individual Party members and the internal networks they formed through volunteering.

Mitchell describes the process of learning through volunteering experience as 'getting some development DNA into the Party.'¹² This specific phrasing of 'development DNA' was echoed by Crabb¹³ and Maude,¹⁴ as well as other MPs including Matt Warman¹⁵ and Mark Pawsey,¹⁶ demonstrating how this characterisation of development at the core of Party identity has travelled within the volunteer community. The central claim, that exposure to development through volunteering changes the perspective of individuals and thus has a wider organisational effect, was also repeated during other interviews, including with MPs Damian

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Hinds and Tobias Ellwood,¹⁷ and participants in Project Maja.¹⁸ Baroness Hodgson expressed the view that Project Umubano had ‘played a very valuable role in educating many people in the Conservative Party about international development.’¹⁹ Similarly, a former Parliamentary Candidate suggested that ‘being on Project Umubano is the equivalent of some people actually having been to school, in terms of being able to debate on this issue.’²⁰

The experience of volunteering helped members feel more credible and confident, providing greater legitimacy and authority to speak on aid and development, an outcome commonly observed in volunteering research (Bentall et al., 2010, DfID, 2013). Pawsey told us: ‘I’m able to be more authoritative and more sympathetic [when challenged about issues like climate change and development] than I would have been if I hadn’t taken part in Umubano.’²¹ Krystal Miller, reflecting on her role as Mayor speaking at a genocide awareness day, similarly felt that volunteering enhanced her authority: ‘I was able to speak from the heart, and from my own experience, which I hope made it more meaningful.’²² Others suggest it provided not only experience to draw on to support development, but also the ability to respond to critics with greater confidence and credibility. Guy Opperman MP described the challenges he experiences from those who argue aid should be cut, and how his experiences with Maja have helped him respond robustly:

‘we met the bloke on the ground who was charged with exercising and spending UK taxpayers cash. When you can do that, my Lordy you can explain the argument and you can assure people that, to the best of your ability, this is money well spent, that this is something on a very worthy cause and you can articulate and explain it.’²³

By exposing Party members to development challenges in a safe environment, largely away from the public gaze and in the company of other like-minded Party members, Mitchell and Crabb sought to create a cohort of, as they put it, ‘development champions’ and ‘development

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defenders.’ The legitimacy of this group would come from their claim to have seen and experienced development for themselves. Discussing David Cameron’s support for Umubano, Crabb referred to the then-Party leader’s ‘prescience’ in recognising that being a supporter of a significant role for the UK in global development was ‘easy’ in 2005, when Make Poverty History and the high profile of development made it a popular position, but that this position would eventually come under increased scrutiny and attack from within and outside the Party.²⁴ Crabb argued that personal experiences of volunteers were intended to ‘provide a *bulwark*, for when being a defender of aid would not be so easy as it was in 2005 or 2007’ (author emphasis).²⁵ He also invoked the importance of physical and emotional aspects of volunteering experience, saying that he saw the aim of Umubano as creating ‘a cohort of people who had tasted it, had lived and breathed it, and would be champions for this area of policy.’²⁶

The connections which develop between volunteers are an important part of sustaining subsequent engagement with development. Crabb suggested that Umubano has created friendships and networks which ‘run deep’,²⁷ and this was strongly reflected in our interviews and observations of volunteers. This may be partly due to the effect of volunteering on otherwise rather rigid Party hierarchies. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown MP put it succinctly: ‘the real benefit of these projects is when someone has a paintbrush or a spade, or whatever, everybody is equal...it brings everybody together in a team-working atmosphere.’²⁸ This was echoed by Suella Fernandes MP who described how ‘going through new experiences together [gives you a] unique bond.’²⁹ Despite this claim, when we asked who they had kept in touch with following their volunteering experience MP volunteers mentioned mainly other MPs. Nevertheless, the creation of the Conservative Friends of International Development as a mechanism to supporting the network of volunteers and interested individuals, along with regular alumni events to raise funds for future volunteering projects, enables sustained

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vertical connections between senior Party members, volunteers and activists through this shared interest.

Through supporting volunteering the Party has supported an internal shift, from a situation where few Conservatives would feel comfortable speaking publicly on development to one where there is a critical mass of voices and involvement with development is a legitimate part of Conservative political identity, rather than a somewhat unusual addition to it. It is however important to note here that despite Crabb's aim of creating development champions, the link between volunteering and subsequent engagement is complicated. There is no suggestion that exposure to development challenges and experience of volunteering automatically converts aid sceptics, nor that there is any one reliable and consistent observable effect, whereby volunteers always become public advocates for international development. Volunteering can nevertheless provide experience and perspective. While there is a clear push to promote development as a legitimate area for Party members to engage with, there is also respect for a spectrum of views on aid and development. In the following section we will probe this issue of causality directly, asking to what extent volunteering can be linked to change in Party position on development.

Volunteering impacts – a tentative golden thread?

We cannot say whether volunteers on Projects Umubano and Maja would have engaged in development volunteering elsewhere, without Party support. It is similarly difficult to establish whether volunteering experience led solely and directly to subsequent engagement with development as a policy issue. Nevertheless, in looking for evidence of impact we can explore how volunteers situate their volunteering experience in relation to subsequent actions, and we can consider how they speak about volunteering experiences at key moments in relation to development policy-making.

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Many of our interviewees brought up the issue of the Party's support for the 0.7% aid spending target, unprompted. On this, Jeremy Lefroy MP suggested that volunteering 'helped to consolidate the Conservative Party's approach towards international development, and support for UN commitments.'³⁰ Barrister Richard Honey suggested that Umubano made many participants 'far more warmly disposed to international development and the 0.7% commitment.'³¹ Indeed, it is notable that none of the participants on Project Umubano or Maja voted against the bill to enshrine the target in law. Sir Desmond Swayne MP described the passing of the spending commitment into UK law in 2010 as being 'in part' due to the transformation that rose out of the Umubano experience.³² Pawsey stated more directly that 'I am happy to support the 0.7% spend on international development, because of what I've seen.'³³

When debating the Official Development Target Bill in Parliament, Mitchell made direct reference to project Umubano, and Swayne further stated the following: 'I feel it is important at this moment to put on the record the work of my right hon. Friend [Mitchell]. The growth in consensus [on the 0.7% target] across the House, particularly on the Conservative Benches, is undoubtedly a result of the work he did in opposition with respect to Project Umubano and the work he did as Secretary of State' (HC Deb, 12 September 2014). When Pauline Latham MP spoke in favour of the 0.7% target in Parliament, she explained: 'I was one of those people who went on Project Umubano with the Secretary of State, and we saw so many things that impressed us' (HC Deb, 1 July 2010). Drawing on this experience, she emphasised the importance of the 0.7% target and argued aid money must be spent well. Volunteering experience has also been mentioned in other Parliamentary debates to add weight to volunteers' statements on development and aid, including by Robert Halfon MP during a debate on UK aid to Rwanda (HC Deb, 19 November 2012).

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It is difficult to disaggregate the impacts of Umubano and Maja on particular policies and agendas. However, volunteering literature has found that '[g]lobal awareness among returning volunteers and sending organizations could ... encourage support for development aid' (Sherraden et al., 2008: 411), suggesting that awareness raising by Mitchell and other volunteering alumni may have contributed to members' support for the 0.7% target. That said, the Conservative Party is a unique sending organisation and the picture of support for aid is complicated; volunteers are not universally supportive of aid spending at current levels, or necessarily convinced that UK aid is well spent. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown MP's response reflected the wider views we found amongst volunteers: 'a lot of people in this country feel that foreign aid is wasted, and I'm in no doubt that some of it is; but if it's well targeted, and is properly spent and evaluated, then I think it can do a lot of lasting good.'³⁴ Clearly, such responses signal sensitivity to divided public opinion on UK aid, but it also shows determination to raise the level of debate on UK aid and a willingness to push back on criticism of UK's role in development. This, we suggest, stems from personal volunteering experience and the sustained networks which built up within the Party over time to defend this commitment, in the face of electoral pressure and criticism.

There are also individual volunteers who credit Umubano with sparking lifelong personal or professional commitment to development. For example, Andrew Jones MP described his ongoing commitment, along with Lefroy and Councillor David Millican among others, to support an orphanage they visited in Burundi during the Umubano project.³⁵ Crabb was co-author of a 'Conservative Vision for International Development', launched at the 2017 Party Conference (Merriman et al., 2017). Latham told us that Umubano, along with a self-organised project in Uganda, had fuelled her interest in international development. Her desire to become more involved and informed on the issue led her to stand successfully for membership of the House of Commons International Development Select Committee (IDC),

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and her involvement with development-related All Party Parliamentary Groups.³⁶ Looking more deeply at the IDC we find further evidence that development volunteers may be more actively engaged than their counterparts. From 2007-17, IDC Conservative Party Members that had previously volunteered in overseas social action projects had an average attendance rate of 77.6%, compared to 51.7% for those Conservative Members who had not volunteered.³⁷ The connection between high attendance rate and overseas volunteering is not conclusive, but it provides a good indication of a sustained engagement with development policy.

This long-term commitment recounted by many volunteering alumni reflects a dominant view in volunteering literature, which often reports impacts in terms of increased engagement with international development issues (Bentall et al., 2010, Lough et al., 2009). Though isolating the importance of volunteering projects in the adoption of particular policies is challenging, it is clear that these experiences were drawn upon in projecting issue ownership when debating the 0.7%. Moreover, the data showing increased IDC attendance rates and independent post-volunteering activities point to an impact beyond mere lip-service. The golden thread does not take us all the way from Rwanda in 2007 to concrete policy impact, but it takes us much further than might be expected from short-term volunteering.

5. Conclusions

The passing of the 0.7% GNI target into UK law reflects more than the ‘Umbano effect’, as one 2017 volunteer described it. It is however clear from the interviews that the experience of volunteering is valued by MPs, whether in facing down aid critics or supporting the UK position as a global player in international development. This finding complements recent research by Heppell et al. (2017) on attitudes towards aid amongst the 2010-2015

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Parliamentary Conservative Party. They demonstrate quantitatively that Cameron was very successful in transforming opinion towards aid among parliamentarians, and our study contributes one previously hidden explanatory factor behind this transformation. It also provides the first substantive explanation as to why this aspect of the Conservative Party modernisation agenda has survived the loss of Cameron: first, through Howard's earlier intervention the groundwork for a new Conservative position on development had been laid; and second, through direct experience of volunteering the Party enabled individual engagement with development and built a network of critically-engaged development supporters within the Party. The embedding of international development awareness and engagement within the Party has helped support a credible bid for 'issue ownership'. The Conservative Party no longer seeks to 'trespass' on 'Labour territory' when talking about development, as Mitchell put it, but instead claims a distinctive and superior position from that of Labour, based in part on volunteering experience.

It is important to recognise that Projects Umubano and Maja expose volunteers to development challenges for - at most - three weeks at a time. While one might assume this brief experience will not result in a lasting impact, the volunteering literature we reviewed indicates that it can (Lough et al., 2009; Sherraden et al., 2008). Contributing to this literature, we demonstrate that volunteering is powerful and even short-term placements can have significant lasting impacts on those involved and on the sending community, in this case the Conservative Party. The experience of volunteering, however brief and carefully managed by Party staff, sensitises volunteers to development issues and provides a reservoir of experience which participants can draw upon when faced with those who criticise UK aid spending, whether in terms of the amount disbursed or its quality/impact. This suggests that exposure based activities, whereby party members see and experience a policy area for themselves, could provide an important

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avenue of inquiry for those interested in how and why parties – and the individuals who give life to them – shift position on specific policy areas over time.

However, we would sound a note of caution for those who would simply prescribe volunteering experience as a way for parties to build support for and engagement with this policy area. Direct experience does not lead to unqualified support for a significant UK role in international development, for maintaining a large aid budget, or for current UK development priorities. It is more accurate to say that our evidence shows that exposure and experience often translate into long-term interest and commitment to development issues, promote greater openness and willingness to listen to arguments on UK aid, and engender a desire to speak, often at length in national and local (constituency) fora, on UK development policy and volunteering. Our research therefore demonstrates that researching exposure-based activities like volunteering is an important part of understanding how parliamentarians may develop an interest in and commitment to a new area of policy and to understanding how party positions change, but it does not guarantee all change will be positive or move in the same direction.

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Endnotes

¹ School-based mentors are teachers deemed to have a good level of English and, as a result, tasked with supporting colleagues in developing their English language skills and teaching materials for use with their students.

² See also Bentall et al., 2010; Clark and Lewis, 2017; Jones, 2005; Lough et al., 2009; Sherraden et al., 2008; Sin, 2009; Tiessen, 2012; Vodopivec and Jaffe, 2011.

³ MPs from other parties can and do take part in short visits organised by charities such as ActionAid or Oxfam, sometimes including limited forms of volunteering, but these are often cross-Party groups and are managed by the host organisation, with little or no Party input.

⁴ Author interview with Francis Maude at Conservative Party Conference, Manchester, 02/10/17.

⁵ Author interview with Rt Hon Andrew Mitchell MP, former Secretary of State for International Development (2010-12) and founder of Project Umubano, Sutton Coldfield, 21/04/17.

⁶ Author interview with Rt Hon Andrew Mitchell MP (see note 4).

- ⁷ Author interview with Stephen Crabb MP, former organiser of Project Umubano, London, 17/07/17.
- ⁸ Author interview with Rt Hon Andrew Mitchell MP (see note 4).
- ⁹ Author interview with Guy Opperman MP, House of Commons, 11 September 2017.
- ¹⁰ Author interview with Francis Maude (see note 3).
- ¹¹ Author interview with Rt Hon Andrew Mitchell MP (see note 4).
- ¹² Author interview with Rt Hon Andrew Mitchell MP (see note 4).
- ¹³ Author interview with Stephen Crabb MP (see note 6).
- ¹⁴ Author interview with Francis Maude (see note 3).
- ¹⁵ Author interview with Matthew Warman MP, House of Commons, London, 7 November 2017.
- ¹⁶ Author interview with Mark Pawsey MP, Rugby, 31 August 2017.
- ¹⁷ Author interviews with Damian Hinds MP and Tobias Ellwood MP, Conservative Party Conference, Manchester, 3 October 2017.
- ¹⁸ This was reflected in author interviews with Baroness Sayeeda Warsi, House of Commons, 27 July 2017, and with Stuart Andrew MP, House of Commons, 18 July 2017.
- ¹⁹ Personal communication from Baroness Fiona Hodgson, 11 July 2017.
- ²⁰ Author interview with Will Goodhand, former Conservative Parliamentary Candidate, London, 27 July 2017.
- ²¹ Author interview with Mark Pawsey MP (see note 14).
- ²² Author telephone interview with Krystal Miller, 19 July 2017.
- ²³ Author interview with Guy Opperman MP, House of Commons, 11 September 2017.
- ²⁴ Author interview with Stephen Crabb MP (see note 6).
- ²⁵ Author interview with Stephen Crabb MP (see note 6).
- ²⁶ Author interview with Stephen Crabb MP (see note 6).
- ²⁷ Author interview with Stephen Crabb MP (see note 6).
- ²⁸ Author telephone interview with Geoffrey Clifton-Brown MP, 17 July 2017.
- ²⁹ Author interview with Suella Fernandes MP, House of Commons, 25 October 2017.
- ³⁰ Author telephone interview with Jeremy Lefroy MP, 30 June 2017.
- ³¹ Author interview via Skype with Richard Honey, barrister with Frances Taylor Building Chambers, 19 July 2017.
- ³² Author telephone interview with Rt Hon Sir Desmond Swayne MP, former Minister of State for International Development (2014-16), 25/04/17.
- ³³ Author interview with Mark Pawsey MP (see note 14).
- ³⁴ Author telephone interview with Geoffrey Clifton-Brown MP (see note 26).
- ³⁵ Author telephone interview with Andrew Jones MP, 12 May 2017.
- ³⁶ Author interview with Pauline Latham MP, member of the House of Commons International Development Select Committee (2010-2015, 2015-17, 2017-ongoing), Derby, 14/07/17.
- ³⁷ This data was compiled from membership and attendance rates available for the past three years at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/international-development-committee/formal-minutes/> and before that by using <http://archive.org/web/> to access earlier iterations of the same website. To arrive at the percentages, we looked at who the members were and whether they had volunteered with Umubano before or during the time they were members of the Committee. We only counted those eligible to attend 50% or more of meetings in any given year.