

THE LAND OF BALBOA: A CASE STUDY

The Land of Balboa: A Case Study of Humanitarian Aid and U.S.-Panamanian Relations

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Abstract

As citizens of a global community, it is both a duty and pleasure to interact with others of varying languages and cultures and to assist when possible to improve the human condition. These interactions between nations and individuals offer complexities that make this process dynamic and worthy of exploration. In the form of a case study, I will examine this notion along with several associated themes, including the successes and shortcomings of humanitarian aid and nongovernmental organizations, and varying perceptions of such assistance. I will specifically consider how these concepts apply to Panama and its easternmost region, Darién.

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The relationships between the nations of the world are often complex and daunting. Seemingly insurmountable differences can divide citizens of differing countries, preventing communication across cultures and languages. The inevitable process of globalization however, demands an outward-looking perspective from its constituents--one which strives to overcome these obstacles to promote understanding. For this reason it is imperative as citizens of a global community to aspire to embrace this challenge and to focus on the incredible similarities shared by all of its members.

One clear manifestation of this process is humanitarian aid. At a fundamental level, humanitarian aid could be described as global citizens recognizing the needs of others less fortunate, and striving to alleviate adverse circumstances by fulfilling basic needs. Despite this noble intent, such actions clearly have the potential to be distorted. In this respect, it is essential that individuals devoted to the causes of humanitarian aid examine themselves, their projects, and the reception of their efforts in order to ensure that their goals are being satisfied.

The improving conditions of Panamanians and warming relations between Panama and the United States offer the promise of a better future; however it is evident that challenges persist. This study aims to explore the aforementioned criticisms in general, but also with a focus on Panama in the form of a case study, specifically in the border region of Darién and the operations of the nongovernmental organization Global Brigades. As a nation of great regional importance and with a history intertwined with that of the United States, the relationship between the two nations is worthy of consideration when discussing Global Brigades as it provides an explanation for many of Panama's current situation, and the complex nature of the mission such organizations undertake.

History of US-Panamanian Relations

“Dios es panameño” [God is Panamanian] is a Panamanian colloquialism that is attributed to the nation’s favorable circumstances relative to other countries of the region. It refers in part to the country’s water--largely and uniquely safe for consumption, although this is contested--but is also an expression relating to general good fortune. In many ways it can be likened to English expressions attributing this fortune to divine intervention such as “God Bless America,” in which national pride is apparent. There is an alternate interpretation of this phrase however, one which refers ironically to the nation’s troubled history and current challenges. This is clearly a point of interest for those working to improve the circumstances of Panamanians.

To fully understand the current state of Panama and its present demands, it is important to consider its past. The influence of the United States in Panama, and Latin America as a whole, cannot be discounted as northern interests in the region can be traced to times even before Panama’s independence. Falling under various jurisdictions, the area of present-day Panama was known as the *Confederación Granadina* [Grenadine Confederation] and later the *Estados Unidos de Colombia* [the United States of Colombia]. The economic interests of the United States prevailed in 1846, when the Panama Railroad Company was authorized to construct a railroad that traversed the isthmus following the Bidlack Treaty, a source of conflict justifying the presence of the U.S. military (Weeks & Gunson, 1991, p.21). During the U.S. Civil War era, President Abraham Lincoln crafted the Panama Plan, calling for the colonization of the present-day Chiriqui province. The plan was never actualized, but was designed in response to anticipated coal deposits in the region and as a solution for the displaced freedmen, despite the protests of other Latin American states (Scheips, 1952, 421-444). Even prior to establishing formal statehood, the U.S. and Panama were linked, a relationship that persists into the present.

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The creation of Panama as a sovereign nation was achieved for the very purpose of meeting U.S. interests. The isthmus had long been anticipated to be of great logistical value. The merit of constructing a canal linking the Atlantic and Pacific to be utilized by a capable navy was identified well before its creation by naval officer and strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan and provided sufficient incentive for intervention in the region (Chasteen, 2011). When the Hay–Herrán Treaty of 1903— the terms of which permitted the United States to develop a canal to be defended by Colombia- failed to be ratified by the Colombian government, the focus of the US shifted to the efforts of Panamanian secessionists who had previously strived to achieve independence 33 times (Weeks & Gunson, 1991, p. 21-22). Instead, the Canal Treaty was devised, which, in exchange for payment to secessionist leaders, the U.S. was granted

all the rights, power and authority ... which [it] would possess and exercise if it were the sovereign of the territory ... to the entire exclusion of the exercise by the Republic of Panama of any such sovereign rights, power or authority ... in perpetuity. (as cited in Weeks & Gunson, 1991, p. 24)

In this way, the birth of Panama was associated with the U.S. as were many other parts of her history.

It would be inaccurate to state that the U.S.-Panamanian relationship has been without tension. The interventionist policies of the United States, collectively referred to as the Banana Wars, were a source of turmoil leading to outright invasions of Panamanian territory such as in the case of Operation Just Cause. U.S. interests were dominated initially by the maintenance of the U.S. Canal Zone, the presence of which ensured the unhindered control of the Panama Canal (Conniff, 2001, p. 80). Omar Torrijos and Manuel Noriega have become infamous examples of Panamanian Heads of State with interesting ties to the United States. General Torrijos rose to

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power via the ranks of Panama's National Guard, and achieved office as the result of a coup. While he advocated policies that promoted the democratization of the country, this was ultimately only a mask for continued military governance headed by Torrijos (Harding, 2001, p. 139). The Torrijos-Carter Treaties were the fruit of the two Heads of State that attempted to preclude U.S. intervention in domestic Panamanian affairs while still allowing the U.S. to defend the Canal Zone (Conniff, 2001, p. 135). Another significant development originating from the Torrijos regime is the 1977 Canal Treaty, which stipulated terms that the U.S. cede jurisdiction over the Canal Zone to Panamanian authorities after the year 1999 (Weeks & Gunson, 1991, p. 24).

Following the abrupt death of General Torrijos, his associate Manuel Noriega was to become the next Panamanian head of state. Under Noriega's oversight, Panama once again experienced far-reaching militarized governance (Harding, 2001, p. 155). In his book *Our Man in Panama: How General Noriega Used the United States—And Made Millions in Drugs and Arms*, John Dinges describes how Noriega was in many ways perceived as a tolerable evil (Dinges, 1990). With ties to the Central Intelligence Agency and Washington, Noriega permitted the use of Panamanian territory as a staging area for military operations in “Nicaragua and the destabilization of the Sandinista regime” (Smith, 2012, p. 122). The relationship with Noriega however, was destined for turmoil given the laundering of funds derived from narcotics trafficking as well as relations with Colombian cocaine cartels, the rigging of presidential elections, and political suppression via the Dignity Battalions (Smith, 2012, p. 122).

These anti-narcotic tensions were largely motivational for Operation Just Cause. The operation was conducted primarily to remove the dictator Noriega from power (Carpenter, 2003, p. 41). The intervention was also justified by concerns of upholding the terms of the Panama

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Canal Treaty and to “safeguard American lives” (Carpenter, 2003, pp. 41-42). The invasion had profound implications. In accordance with its objective, Noriega was taken into custody and sentenced for drug charges in U.S. court (Musicant, 1990, p. 416). Moreover, the invasion symbolized a significant escalation of Washington’s antidrug campaign as well as the latest manifestation of the nation’s history of military intervention against Latin American states (Carpenter, 2003, p. 42). While there was popular support for the invasion among Panamanians due to anti-Noriega sentiments and aspirations for a quick economic recovery, other nations within the region maintained different perceptions of the intervention (Weeks & Gunson, 1991, pp. 89-92).

Despite the resolution of Operation Just Cause, resistance to the United States’ influence continued in the form of violent attacks against U.S. servicemen. This was the case of the December 20 Movement (*Movimiento de Diciembre 20*, or M-20), an organization claiming the identity of a “nationalist and revolutionary group,” represented such tensions within a population of varying opinions (as cited in Weeks & Gunson, 1991, p. 93). According to Maryland University’s National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Response to Terrorism (2008), M-20’s formation was the direct result of the U.S. invasion of Panama, the inspiration for its attacks on the newly established Panamanian government and U.S. facilities. Presently, the U.S. has shut down or turned over military installations in accordance with the provisions of the Canal Treaty, which called for a withdrawal as of the year 2000. The Panama Canal was transferred to Panamanian sovereignty under the auspices of the Panama Canal Authority. Since the turnover of the canal, the Hong Kong-based investment company Hutchinson Whampoa oversees operations. Panama has witnessed increased autonomy since this transition, but many Panamanians still claim significant indirect U.S. influence in Panamanian affairs, with some

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stating that direct U.S. influence is looming—contingent on the status and security of the canal (Theodossopoulos, 2010).

Despite the mixed perceptions of the prior U.S. military presence, security and drug trafficking concerns remain, especially with the continued war on drugs. This has been a source of perpetual cooperation between the two nations, as well as with other partners in the region. Of particular interest to security concerns and to this study is the extensive cooperation between Panama's SENAFRONT [*Servicio Nacional de Fronteras*] in the easternmost province of Darién (Heyse, 2013). Today, Panamanian perceptions of the U.S. remain mixed at best.

Darién

Some of the observations in the following sections are qualified by time spent working in the region with the organization Global Brigades during a summer Global Health Internship. Throughout the duration of the internship, surveys were conducted in communities so that needs, wants, and desires could be assessed for the benefit of the population and organization. Moreover, during time spent in Darién, the progress Global Brigades was making and the community responses became evident, even in a region rife with challenges.

Despite the numerous developments concerning Panama, it must be recognized that the majority, 55.6 percent of the nation's population is situated in Central Panama (The World Bank, 1999). International interest is located here as well, as it is the seat of the nation's capital and the famous Canal. When asking Panamanians, northern Panama is known for its developed agricultural infrastructure as well as appeal to the tourist industry with destination hot spots such as Bocas del Toro. However, this is not the case with Darién, where a concentrated economic and governmental interest in the Canal region has left the rural periphery largely underdeveloped (The World Bank, 1999).

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What economic development Darién has witnessed has been troublesome and exploitative at best. The region has witnessed concerning rates of deforestation as rural farmers turn to harvesting tropical hardwoods such as teak for income (Chapman, 2008, p. 17). Such unsustainable economic activity provides only temporary solutions to enduring economic blight, and serves to strip the region of one of its most precious resources—the jungle itself, integral to the lifestyles and sustenance of Latino and indigenous populations alike.

Although noted for its colossal lack of development, Darién offers stunning tropical beauty and biodiversity, providing possibilities of ecotourism and additional income. This underdevelopment however, bears consequences, especially when considering the well-being of inhabitants. The primary thoroughfare through the region, the Pan-American Highway, is hardly sufficient to reach distant communities in the region, many of which are resistant to such development in order to maintain culture and tribal lands. The Darién Gap, the single lapse of continuity in the Pan-American Highway, spanning from Alaska to Southern Argentina, stands as a testament to the lack of infrastructure in the region and also to the difficult terrain. In recent history, the Darién Gap has served the operations of FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia]) rebels and narcotics trafficking, the latter of which has been a source of foreign interest and intervention in Panama.

The difficulty in Darién is hardly novel. Early attempts in establishing colonial settlements in the region proved to be both arduous and perilous. The Scottish colonization venture, New Caledonia, first established in 1698 quickly ended in disaster, offering death, disease, and weak logistical support in place of profits promised by Pacific markets. The failed colony instead brought heavy human and capital losses and compromised Scotland's ability to operate independently of England (Ibeji, 2011).

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Despite the challenges inhabitants of Darién encounter, some indigenous peoples have occupied the region successfully even prior to European colonization efforts. Presently, Darién features rich cultural diversity with the prominent Guna (Kuna) and Embera-Wounaan tribes. These peoples have historically inhabited territory which spans the Panama-Columbia border and presently struggle to balance sustenance and retain culture, a crisis of particular concern for organizations aspiring to assist but not impose. The Guna people are known for their hospitality, *mola* artwork, and for the stunning San Blas archipelago which comprise part of their settlements. However, the tribe's history features tension and violence when the Guna people took action in the 1925 Tule Revolt to protest cultural encroachment—a struggle responsible for the great degree of autonomy enjoyed by the tribe today (Conniff, 2001, p. 87).

These struggles have proven to be lasting as the tribes still grapple with cultural and land issues, another concern for nongovernmental organizations operating in the region. The Guna struggle with legal disputes concerning their lands, with many individuals abandoning traditional tribal settlements in favor of developments alongside the Pan-American Highway. Establishing settlements away from traditional tribal lands is done to deter trespassers hoping to develop valuable real estate near the highway for their own benefit.

As will be discussed later, the concept of core and periphery areas in Panama is a recurrent theme. Its application is broad, including most obviously economic interests, as there exists a tendency to focus resources and efforts into the nation's most profitable assets, the capitol and canal. The consequence is a region which endures chronic underdevelopment and sluggish economic activity, with entire communities left with few means to provide for themselves financially. As there is little incentive to invest in Darién, it was evident throughout the course of work in the province that many Panamanians here are fully occupied in meeting

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basic needs. In many communities, large portions of the day were devoted to agriculture to sustain life, and what little remained after was taken to market for meager earnings. In the case of indigenous communities, tourism is increasing but still limited, due in large part to the lacking infrastructure. Instead, the tribes have ingeniously begun to utilize their own cultural and heritage for income, offering crafts and artwork in markets.

This struggle to adapt to an ever-changing economy carries into other issues as many Panamanians of Darién find themselves without means to address basic health concerns, waste management issues, variable and dangerous water sources, and severe challenges in education among others. It is not a lack of awareness of these issues, as the people of Darién are incredibly resourceful and cognizant (and with brilliant solutions) of the challenges that face present and future generations. Rather, it is a preoccupation with more immediate needs as a result of economic circumstances coupled with insufficient government initiatives that is at fault. When speaking with community members, the role of organizations such as Global Brigades in empowering communities to mobilize with incentives and methodology was blatantly clear.

The core and periphery extends into cultural considerations as well. As an international hub of commerce, Panama City's influence and western culture extends to the comparatively tranquil jungles of Darién, the ancestral lands of its indigenous inhabitants. While speaking with members of indigenous communities, many of the older generations were concerned with the preservation of a way of life that predates the original European arrival. Thus, the difficult situation indigenous populations navigate, one in which sustenance and cultural preservation must be balanced, is of utmost importance. This was another strength observed in the operations of Global Brigades, which maintains a decidedly secondary role in the endeavors of the community in an effort to preserve rather than impose.

Effectiveness of Foreign Aid

“La ruinas de buenas intenciones en Darién” [The ruins of good intentions in Darién] is a phrase spoken in communities of the region. The expression summarizes what is all-too-often experienced in Darién—the remains of previous humanitarian projects left in disrepair. Whether initiated due to political ambitions to secure votes or by purely philanthropic endeavors, humanitarian efforts are not new to Darién. Manpower, resources, and know-how have all visited the region in an attempt to mitigate crises, to improve the condition of fellow man, and to alleviate suffering—truly noble causes. It is this exact mentality however, one in which assistance is temporary and not lasting, addressing current issues rather than their fundamental cause, which leaves many groups struggling as though the assistance had never occurred at all. With these efforts in mind, one wonders why communities in Darién, the “forgotten province,” still have issues with basic necessities such as potable drinking water (Chapman, 2008, p. 17).

The situation of Embera Puru offers one such example. Adjacent to the community gathering house, an open-walled structure of thatch roofing complete with benches, stands a modern-looking device. The costly and solar powered system was designed by a foreign engineering company hoping to make an impact on rural communities, and ideally serves to transport water from a source within one mile of the village limits. The water is then subsequently stored in a tank near the community center. After conversing with locals, it was clear that the project had not met the expectations of the community as there was a period of several weeks in which the pump was nonoperational. The repair was a simple press of a button. According to the leaders of the tribe, the system was installed, with little instruction regarding maintenance, leaving the tribe unable to service their ruin of good intention. The device to date is unreliable, and no technicians to service the pump or solar technology it uses are available. In

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addition, after speaking with Global Brigades staff, interns were informed about the many flaws of solar power in such conditions as jungle vegetation can render the technology useless.

These findings indicate the need for practical solutions to be implemented by communities. This pursuit culminated in a rainwater collection system conceptualized by interns and staff of Global Brigades. The system was designed to address the seasonal scarcities and questionable quality of local water by taking advantage of the massive quantities of rainfall in Darién. The system is affordable, compatible with the existing week-long brigade structure, and constructed with local skills and materials.

Another case involves the Wagandi Guna community, in which a government-sponsored water system consisting of a dam, pump, aqueduct, and storage tower was constructed. However, months after construction, seasonal flooding destroyed the dam and a fallen tree had rendered the pump in need of repair—both of which are far too costly for the tribe to consider. Thus, community members find themselves in a situation very similar to that in which they were before the project's construction.

This issue is hardly localized to Darién. In *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (2004) author Tracy Kidder discusses the international humanitarian work of Dr. Paul Farmer. A theme of discussion in the novel is “inappropriate technology” and its ability to instill hesitance in those that would otherwise rush to aid populations in need. The concept refers in this case to the use of excessive and costly equipment to unsustainably address the needs of a community, should they be sanitary, medical, agricultural, or of any other field. In Dr. Farmer's case the fear of wasting resources on inappropriate technology, systems too complex to be used, repaired, or maintained by a community, is an irrational obstacle when considering that the very lives of people depend on action. Despite Farmer's rejection, it is a very real concern when motivating partners in aid

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and development. While on nowhere near the same global scale, these two cases from Darién are examples of the very same issue.

The appropriateness of technology is something that is considered by Global Brigades when designing programs for rural communities. Whether constructing latrines, schools, water treatment or storage projects, the materials and labor (save the volunteers) are sourced locally. This ensures that the community has the access to resources for maintenance and repair should the need arise, or to construct similar projects should the members feel empowered to do so. Additionally, members of the community are encouraged to be involved in the construction of the project and to be invested in its maintenance. Members are required to have some monetary investment and will be supervised by committees of community peers to ensure project maintenance. In this way, Global Brigades aims to empower the community with the organization's own resources to confront issues in a sustainable way that lasts, even when the organization transitions to other areas in need.

Global Brigades' model of sustainable development is said to be the product of the trials of the very organization and others with similar ambitions. The organization observed historical successes and shortcomings to determine a model to be implemented. The Global Brigades model is not without disadvantages, however. One could argue that Global Brigades' model of sustainable development, one that favors a holistic approach to tackling community issues, can tie the organization into relatively fewer communities for longer periods of time, thus restricting the number of communities able to be impacted by volunteer efforts. This limitation has warranted discussion in the past, motivating Global Brigades to consolidate its area of operations in Panama to more effectively partner with communities holistically (Global Brigades, 2011). As

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with many nongovernmental organizations, Global Brigades is also vulnerable to economic forces as it is highly dependent on the donations of volunteers to sustain operations.

According to Global Brigades' *Annual Report 2011*, in which the organization releases official data concerning the operations of its holistic model of sustainable development, the organization had a number of its brigade disciplines aiding community members. Throughout the duration of 15 Medical and Dental Brigades, 3,785 patients were served and data was collected to assess future brigade needs and destinations for mobile medical clinics. The Public Health Brigade program was introduced to Panama at a later date and has since been responsible for sustainable waste management projects such as compost latrines and water collection and treatment systems which are maintained by communities. Business Brigades, tasked with providing financial services, business guidance, and organizing community cooperatives with a Community Investment Fund, mobilized 23 brigades in the year 2011 (Global Brigades, 2011). The Environmental Brigades program organized seven brigades, planting a total of 600 trees and provided many hours of education in support of objectives ranging from reforestation, sustainable agriculture (permaculture), and waste management (Global Brigades, 2011). Law Brigades, which focuses on providing rural families access to legal resources to resolve civil and property disputes, completed six brigades throughout 2011, in which 37 families began the land titling process as a result of its services (Global Brigades, 2011).

Global Brigades is by no means the only nongovernmental organization operating within Panama and the confines of Darién. Regarding rampant deforestation, organizations such as Planting Empowerment also utilize a sustainable process, one which empowers local farmers to benefit from their own harvests while preserving the biodiversity and native arboreal composition of the region in the process (Chapman, 2008, pp. 17-18). With well-intentioned

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foreign investment coupled with a detailed knowledge of the region only inhabitants can provide, a sustainable solution in which all parties benefit has come to fruition.

The deforestation is the result of the desperate struggle for sustenance in which many Panamanians are engaged, but is hardly an isolated matter. According to The World Bank's Poverty Assessment report, indigenous groups are recognized as being especially afflicted, including the aforementioned Embera-Wounaan and Guna tribes, with Darién named a region of especially high poverty rates (1999). Additionally, the report mentions a staggering amount of troubling observations, including: a "strong correlation between poverty and child malnutrition" involving "over 16% of all children under five (close to 50,000)," "probable wage discrimination" against indigenous workers, disparities in education and healthcare, and lower life expectancies among the poor (1999, pp. ii-iii). With regards to action, The World Bank recommends that "first priority should be given to: the rural poor, the indigenous... poor children and youths, undernourished children, and pregnant and lactating women" in accordance with the Panamanian government's Poverty Strategy and Action Plan (1999, pp. vi-vii).

While nongovernmental organizations maintain a multitude of objectives and specialties, the ways in which the human condition is evaluated also vary. Often these measurements take the form of indices, such as the Human Development Index, assembled by the United Nations Development Programme. The HDI considers lifespan and the quality of health, access to education, and standards of living. Panama ranks 60th in the world with a score of .78 as of 2012 (United Nations Development Programme, 2014). When considering historical index scorings, it is encouraging to note that HDI values have increased in Panama, however these promising findings are not indicative of regional variation (United Nations Development Programme, 2014).

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The UN also attempts to account for aspects the HDI may fail to represent, and so modifies HDI scores, such as in the case of the Inequality-adjusted Human Development Index (IHDI) introduced in 2010 (United Nations Development Programme, 2014). With inequality, IHDI values fall below HDI values- the difference is proportional to the extent of inequality. The 2012 data shows a decrease from .78 to .588, a loss of 24.6%, which drops the nation's standing 15 places on the index (United Nations Development Programme, 2014). This illustrates the inequality Panamanians currently face.

The UN-affiliated World Bank, responsible for providing financial means to developing countries to reduce poverty, has its own set of measurements. One measure of significance is the Gini coefficient (or index or ratio), which serves to measure income distribution within a nation. A score of 0 indicates perfect equality while 100 signifies a higher degree of inequality in income distribution. As of 2010, Panama has an index scoring of 51.9, a relatively high value when compared to other ratings (The World Bank, 2014; The CIA World Handbook, 2014). This relatively high rating (suggesting income inequality) is a testament to the diversity in development between Panama's urban center and rural periphery. The high Gini score also reflects the significant decrease from HDI to IHDI scorings previously mentioned.

Global Brigades too has its own extensive survey conducted in every home the organization intends to become involved with. Additionally, data is collected when patients are admitted to mobile health clinics during medical brigades, so that the need for additional follow-up brigades can be assessed and proposed to community members. In this way, the data collected provides an intimate view of a given community's challenges, an integral part of fulfilling the organization's tenants of service and empowerment.

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According to the World Health Organization Global Health Observatory's Data Repository, several indicators of public health have displayed a progression in medical infrastructure and access to care (2013). Certain measures including declining mortality in under five years of life, increasing per capita expenditure on health, above-average life expectancy, rising use of health services (contraception, antenatal care, births monitored by skilled health personnel) and increasing portions of the population having access to and using improved water and sanitation are indicative of increased public awareness and efforts to improve the quality of life and public health in Panama (2013).

However, serious concerns exist when considering comparable measurements of other regional nations. According to the World Health Organization Data, grave challenges still exist in Panama. The health workforce per 10,000 citizens, including physicians and nurses, remains lower than the regional average, suggesting that the lacking medical infrastructure is an issue that extends beyond the confines of Darién (2013). Additionally, even though under-5 year mortality rates have been declining since 1990, Panama's rate is higher than the regional average, indicating that the country can likely take measures to improve early-life medical care (Global Health Organization, 2013). Despite Panama's challenges, the current state of public health and medicine should be viewed optimistically. The current medical situation compares to others of the region by many measures, and has displayed improvement in recent years. This is an excellent environment to not only improve citizens' access to medical care, but to improve awareness through education and community activism.

Implications and Criticisms of Foreign Aid

While humanitarian aid serves to unify the international community as well as to strive for the betterment of the human condition, there are implications and criticisms of such

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international action. When considering the U.S.-Panamanian relationship, an accord plagued by what many Panamanians regard as blatant colonialism, U.S. presence and intervention is viewed with varying degrees of welcome and disdain (Theodossopoulos, 2010). Theodossopoulos also found that in some cases, Panamanians' interpersonal feelings toward U.S. citizens were influenced by these troubled political relations (2010). It is clear then why organizations that are directly associated with foreign (especially that of the United States of America) governments, such as the Peace Corps and USAID, naturally draw suspicion and may encounter varying cooperation and receptivity.

Throughout Darién, communities and their members were incredibly receptive to Global Brigades and its volunteers. In fact, volunteers were permitted to enter the homes and converse with community members to become more personally acquainted with one another, to share in cultural discovery, and discuss the impacts the organization's presence has had on the lives of both volunteers and Panamanians. As Theodossopoulos (2010) noted, difficult times were acknowledged, both in the past and present, but attitudes towards individual *gringos* were both appreciative and receptive.

Within the United States, the government sponsors a variety of foreign assistance programs, whose activity has been increasing due to "concerns that impoverished and failing societies could offer breeding grounds or havens for terrorists" (McMahon, 2007, para. 1). According to a USAID publication, five core goals of U.S. foreign aid include: "promoting transformational development, particularly in governance, institutional capacity, and economic restructuring; strengthening fragile states; providing humanitarian assistance; supporting U.S. strategic interests, especially in countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan; and mitigating global and international ills, including HIV/AIDS" (as cited in McMahon, 2007, para. 15). In

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fact, when consulting the Foreign Operations Appropriations Bill for the fiscal year 2006, \$20.7 billion was allotted for foreign assistance (McMahon, 2007). The strategy of government foreign assistance is to coordinate various agencies including the Millennium Challenge Corporation, USAID, the State Department, the Peace Corps among others, and fund other nongovernmental organizations operating abroad.

Despite the vast funding of foreign assistance programs from the U.S.—the top donor within the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)—it had a comparatively low ranking in donations when considering percentage of GNP in 2006 (McMahon, 2007). In light of these criticisms, it must be conceded that a substantial amount of aid is channeled through the U.S. military and thus not accounted for in these reports.

Moreover, the effectiveness of foreign aid in improving the U.S. image in other nations such as Japan offers promising changes in perceptions at times, while in other cases, specifically in Indonesia and Pakistan, findings “suggest that the impact of humanitarian efforts has its limits” (Wike, 2012, para. 1). From the perspective of a government desiring to improve its image internationally, it becomes apparent that humanitarian efforts are not always effective in securing the support of inhabitants, hardly a motivation for government-sponsored aid.

In an article published by the Council on Foreign Relations, the effectiveness of foreign assistance is mixed (McMahon, 2007). The U.S. government is criticized for historically enriching dictators, such as “Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire and Pakistan’s Mohammed Zia ul-Haq” to promote strategic interests during the Cold War (McMahon, 2007, para. 18). However, to ignore the numerous successes would be to ignore the eradication of smallpox, near-elimination of polio and immunization of children worldwide (McMahon, 2007).

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This emphasizes the essential role that nongovernmental organizations maintain in that they may be free from tensions that may arise from these national and political associations, instead able to operate focusing only on the objectives at hand in theory—the improvement of the human condition via the organization’s respective focus. Acceptance and an embodiment of the organization’s vision must exist in the community for lasting results. In the case of Global Brigades, the vision of the community and organization become shared, providing a basis for collaboration, communication, and satisfaction of all parties involved.

To state however, that tensions between host governments and nongovernmental organizations do not arise would be inaccurate. The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) mentions that these relations “can often be strained” as questions of sovereignty and self-reliance arise (Taylor et al., 2012, p. 2). For this reason, organizations must have the capacity to not only effectively resolve mission-oriented issues, but also those involving the host government.

According to the Overseas Development Institute, the global system of humanitarian action comprises mostly, considering presence and resources, of a small group of very large organizations including those of UN origin, the International Movement of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, and five other large NGOs (Taylor et al., 2012). Currently, it should be noted that there are approximately 4,400 total organizations worldwide currently operating and that together the organizational expenditures were greater than \$2.7 billion in 2010 (Taylor et al., 2012). With such a vast sum of money and resources devoted to the cause of improving the human condition, it is crucial to understand to which locations and issues the resources are being allocated. The ODI acknowledges that these resources are still insufficient and unable to address rising demands attributed in part to increases in climate-related natural disasters, and that they are devoted continually to a “small number of protracted crises: Sudan, Pakistan, Ethiopia,

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Somalia, DR Congo, Afghanistan, the occupied Palestinian Territories, and high-profile natural disasters such as Haiti” (Taylor et al., 2012, p. 10).

An area of criticism and contention lies in the fiscal efficiency of nongovernmental organizations. The ODI concedes that “many agencies have made real efforts to increase investment in operational capacity and quality of human resources” (Taylor et al., 2012, p. 11). The proportion of budgets derived from donations that go to operational costs has historically been a point of criticism in some organizations, making these efforts a welcome development. Issues such as corruption present clear challenges to the efficiency of an organization, but even a seemingly well-intentioned endeavor, such as “the constant drive to minimise administrative costs” had adverse consequences, leading to chronic underinvestment in some cases (Taylor et al., 2012, p. 11).

Global Brigades’ structure allows it to evade criticisms which can befall such top-heavy transnational nongovernmental organizations. Administratively, the organization utilizes staff from both the donor (U.S., Canada, and various European partners) and host nations, providing a full spectrum of expertise and resources, although limited so as to not detract from resources otherwise channeled to operations. A cursory review of Global Brigade’s finances in its *Annual Report 2011* reflects this strategy. Among the organization’s expenses, general administration, salaries & related, and fundraising & credit card fees are dwarfed by operational expenses such as program and volunteer travel grants (Global Brigades, 2011). With the organization’s projected growth, maintaining such fiscal discipline will continue to be essential to ensure the organization’s impact continues to be lasting.

Still another concern is the specific issue with which the organizations focus themselves. The ODI reasons that “there is an evident tendency within the humanitarian system towards

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sudden bursts of attention to particular issues” and that “it was a challenge to maintain sufficient attention within organizations on these issues that need to be mainstreamed” (Taylor et al., 2012, p. 12). It is clear that a number of obstacles that face the global community are chronic in nature, and require sustained attention and effort for any progress to be achieved.

Lastly, concerns over the enduring effects of humanitarian action exist. In the *ODI's The State of the Humanitarian System* (Taylor et al., 2012), it is noted that the “paucity of investment in local and national capacities was a repeated concern, as were the top-down orientation of the system and the risk of undermining local capacities” (p. 46). If local governments and community are left in a debilitated state, the intervention’s effect is compromised. It must also be mentioned that that improvement in these areas has been witnessed, with organizations making efforts to continue to make improvements (Taylor et al., 2012, p. 11). Continual progress in this respect must be ensured.

Donato Ndong-Bidyogo, a native of Equatorial Guinea well known for his literature and articles for the Spanish newspaper *El País*, often refers to flawed approaches in humanitarian aid and development issues in his works. While discussing affairs of his nation and the region, he offers a perspective on the changing nature of humanitarian aid, specifically on the willingness of the international community to provide loans that consequently worsen a region’s predicament. While speaking primarily about the situation in Africa, Ndong specifically details a tendency of some governments to use foreign investments for their own benefits, leaving the intended recipients to suffer (Ugarte & Ndong, 2004). The need for organizations and initiatives to have a significant presence in the host country is clear, and would be conducive to ensure that resources are utilized effectively.

Closing

A traditional Tanzanian folktale describes an unfortunate situation in which two monkeys naively attempt to rescue fish struggling to escape a stream in which they are hopelessly trapped (Healey, 2014). Upon freeing the fish, the monkeys are despaired to see all of the rescued perish, and only regret offering assistance too late to have saved the struggling fish from drowning. Such a scenario could not be more relevant to the international community as its members strive to understand one another, and in the case of the humanitarian aid and development sector, attempt to prevent other parties from drowning.

Doing this remains an extremely difficult task despite improving modes of communication. Linguistic, cultural, geographical and a number of other barriers remain even today, and the world's pressing issues certainly are not vanishing. Thus, continued humanitarian action is and will continue to be necessary. To ensure the needs of the world are being met, an adequate method of self-evaluation must be implemented. The most effective means of ensuring progress is to assess the current situation in a manner independent of influential factors. In observing the progress made to date, the organizational structure, fiscal efficiency, and perceptions of the organization must all be taken into consideration.

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