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# 'I was the weird one down there'. The intersecting experiences of Norwegian international sport for development and peace volunteers

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**ABSTRACT**

For more than two decades, Norway has been one of the leading actors in engaging international volunteers to sport for development and peace (SDP) organisations in the Global South. SDP is a priority area of Norwegian sports politics, mainly projected through the Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NIF) where the international SDP volunteer (SDP-IV) scheme is central. Both local and international volunteers play a crucial role in SDP projects worldwide. To date, research on SDP-IVs has explored individual motivations, learning outcomes and experiences, and there is a body of critical literature examining SDP-IVs through the lenses of neo-liberalism, post-colonialism and critical race theory. Nevertheless, there is limited research addressing how SDP-IVs understand their roles as part of larger SDP policy structures. In response, and drawing on intersectional analysis, this paper explores how stories of gender, ethnicity and class intersect in Norwegian SDP-IV's experiences of working in the Global South under the NIF's SDP scheme. The study draws on empirical data from an online survey ($N = 91$) and two focus groups with former Norwegian SDP-IVs. The results suggest that SDP-IVs variously negotiate their roles and positions in local communities based on social categories. Stories of feeling different, finding comfort in other Norwegian SDP-IVs and negotiating power and privilege were recurrent in the data. It is also argued that by entering a system marked by 'aid rhetoric', the SDP-IVs may sustain uneven power relationships between the Global North and Global South. The paper draws attention to the need for critically informed SDP volunteer programme designs that better prepare SDP-IVs for work in Global South contexts.

Since 1997, the Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NIF) have recruited Norwegian volunteers for different sports for development and peace (SDP) projects in the Global South. The engagement can be viewed in light of the history of Norwegian SDP commencing in the early 1980s, international development volunteering in general and international SDP volunteering in particular.

International development volunteers (IVs) are individuals who travel across international borders for an extended period, usually to the Global South, to engage in organised activities aimed at promoting development (McGloin & Georgeou, 2016). According to Schech et al. (2020, p. 253)

'volunteering in nonprofit organizations (NPOs) of the Global South has grown in response to increasing popular awareness of global development challenges and global agendas encouraging publics of the Global North to become actively involved in addressing them'. Subsumed in the areas of capacity development, skills transfer and social capital, IVs are believed to be a cost-efficient way of building capacity in the Global South while simultaneously promoting global citizenship and building international understanding between people and nations (McGloin & Georgeou, 2016). Scholars have highlighted the benefits of international development volunteering, demonstrating that IVs are positively impacted through increased international awareness, international social capital and international career options (e.g. McBride et al., 2012; Tiessen & Heron, 2012). However, researchers are also concerned that IV schemes may construct an image of poor countries as requiring help from privileged Westerners to develop, thereby sustaining hierarchies between givers and recipients of development aid (McGloin & Georgeou, 2016). Further, scholars have criticised the neo-liberal character of IV programmes as arguably benefiting IVs more than the organisations and local communities where they work (Perold et al., 2013; Tiessen & Kumar, 2013). Studies of organisations in the Global South have for example brought attention to the fact that they often have little control over the selection of volunteers and end up hosting young IVs with marginal or no experience (Lough & Tiessen, 2018). Additionally, a central criticism is the lack of critical reflection demonstrated by many IVs. It is argued that the time spent abroad often confirms rather than challenges preconceptions, cementing what one already thinks that one knows (Clarke & Norman, 2021; Ouma & Dimaras, 2013; Simpson, 2004).

Both local volunteers and IVs play a crucial role in SDP projects worldwide. In line with the growing SDP sector, the body of research on international SDP volunteerism (SDP-IV) has grown in the last decade. According to Giulianotti et al. (2021), it has mainly centred around two broad themes. First, at the individual level, researchers have scrutinised SDP-IVs' motivations (Smith et al., 2014), learning outcomes and experiences (Darnell, 2011). Second, critical perspectives have viewed SDP-IV schemes through the lenses of neo-liberalism, post-colonialism and critical race theory (e.g. Clarke & Norman, 2021; Dao & Chin, 2020; Darnell, 2007, 2010b; Forde, 2015; Lucas & Jeanes, 2020; Tiessen, 2011), aligning with the critical literature on international development volunteering.

Previous research on Norwegian SDP has criticised how the NIF has systemically attempted to export a Norwegian 'sport for all' model to the Global South, revealing a problematic power relationship between aid donor(s) and recipient(s) (Straume & Steen-Johnsen, 2012). Further, Straume and Hasselgård (2014) demonstrated how Norwegian SDP through the NIF has continued to reproduce and sustain the hierarchical relationship by offering sport as a solution to the 'development problem'. Nevertheless, Hasselgård and Straume (2015) also showed how local actors have resisted and influenced the SDP policy discourse by reformulating policy frameworks to fit local practice.

SDP-IVs have been instrumental to Norwegian SDP policy and practice for more than two decades. However, there has been little focus on understanding the Norwegian SDP-IV's experiences of working in Global South contexts, and how these experiences are interconnected with their experiences of being part of a larger SDP policy scheme as NIF representatives.

We apply an intersectional lens to our analysis, and seek 'to explore intersecting patterns between different structures of power and how people are simultaneously positioned – and position themselves – in multiple categories, such as gender, class and ethnicity' (Christensen & Jensen, 2012, p. 110). Through this lens, and specifically with the use of the domains of power of Collins and Bilge (2020), we ask the following research question: How do stories of gender, ethnicity and class intersect in Norwegian SDP-IV's experiences of working in the Global South as part of the NIF's SDP scheme?

### The NIF's SDP-IV scheme

As Hasselgård (2015) demonstrated, multiple Norwegian actors have over the years been involved in carrying out international SDP activities. However, the primary actor has been the NIF, which

initiated its first SDP project in 1983, to develop grassroots sports structures in Tanzania. The policies deployed to reach the grassroots have been consistent ever since: first, by supporting the development of formal national grassroots sports structures, such as national sports councils; second, and in cooperation with these formal sports structures, developing national sports policies to accommodate issues such as gender equity and child safeguarding, and, third, by educating officials to manage these national sports structures, such as coaches, teachers and leaders (Hasselgård, 2015). For the latter, part of the NIF's scheme has been to recruit Norwegian 'experts' to work on projects alongside local partners.

The NIF SDP-IV scheme officially commenced in 1997 in partnership with the South African non-governmental organisation *Sport Coaches' OutReach* (SCORE). A central part of the partnership was to recruit Norwegian participants to train physical education teachers and sports coaches in communities in various SCORE locations across Southern Africa. Since then, more than 400 young Norwegians between 20 and 30 years have been recruited to work for partner organisations in the Global South.

Selected volunteers are encouraged to enrol in a one-year 'sport, culture and development' programme at a Norwegian university, where the volunteering experience counts as practical training. By simultaneously enrolling in the study programme, SDP-IVs receive study loans and stipends from the Norwegian State Educational Loan Fund. The SDP-IV programme is administered by the NIF in collaboration with Global South partner organisations and funded by the Norwegian Agency for Exchange Cooperation (Norec). Living, travel, and insurance costs are covered by the programme. All participants undergo an initial training course in Norway with Norec-volunteers serving in other fields. SDP-IVs enrolled in the study programme have additional courses and lectures before and during their stay, with a focus on critical and reflective discussions on development aid, SDP and own SDP practices.

The goals of the SDP-IV programme encompass 'volunteering for international understanding' (Lough & Tiessen, 2018, p. 106) and the *learning model* typology, which focuses on developing the personal and professional skills and intercultural competences of volunteers to 'expand their understanding and commitment to global issues in all aspects of their life' (Plewes & Stuart, 2007, p. 9). According to the NIF, being an SDP-IV embodies 'socialization, being part of a sports community, and acquiring new acquaintances across cultures' (Norges idrettsforbund, 2023).

## The intersectional perspective

The novelty of intersectional theories as they were developed by Black feminist scholars in the 1980s, was the development of a common language regarding the relationships and linkages between categories of difference (Zwier & Grant, 2014). According to Levine-Rasky (2011), in intersectional analyses, identity and exclusion are multiple and complex, and produced and sustained by social, political, and ideological contexts.

> Who one 'is' is not static; it is wholly relational to others, to culture, and to organizations in which one moves. Identity is elected *and* it is emergent in relation to power. Exclusion effects individuals and groups marked by multiple categories of 'difference' (p. 242).

Thus, from an intersectional perspective, stories of gender, ethnicity and social class cannot be sufficiently understood if analysed independently, because these social positions and identity markers are experienced simultaneously and can be variously performed in different situations (Collins & Bilge, 2020). An intersectional approach to research allows for a multi-dimensional understanding of how social categories serve as tools for inclusion and exclusion, positioning, and hierarchy and how experiences related to gender, class or ethnicity intersect in daily interactions. Several studies on SDP-IVs (e.g. Chawansky, 2015; Dao & Chin, 2020; Darnell, 2010b; Forde, 2015) have used intersecting social positions, such as race and gender, in their analyses. In these studies, intersectionality as a concept is not frequently identified; instead, it is an underlying thread. For example, Darnell (2007) explored Global North SDP-IVs and described whiteness as 'racial characteristics that assume and presumes a normative social position through the discursive intersection of gender, class,

sexuality, domesticity, respectability and superiority, and that allows for the intelligibility of racialized bodies' (p. 563). In our analysis of the SDP-IVs' experiences, we contribute to the literature by utilising intersectional theory, and particularly the domains of power identified by Collins and Bilge (2020).

Although the origin of intersectional analysis was the study of oppression and social stratifications from the perspective of marginalised groups, several scholars have argued for majority-inclusive perspectives, as identity markers such as ethnicity, class and gender influence all humans (Yuval-Davis, 2007; Zinn & Dill, 1996). In this paper's analysis, we apply a '*majority-inclusive* principle' (Christensen & Jensen, 2012, p. 112).

According to Yuval-Davis (2007, p. 566) 'some of the approaches to intersectional analysis do not differentiate between the analytical levels of social locations, identities and political values'. Consequently, analyses of social stratifications should include several levels, as axes of power on a macro level intervene in people's real lives. In this paper, we use the four domains of power by Collins and Bilge (2020). *The structural domain of power* refers to the 'the fundamental structures of social institutions' (p. 7). By organising subordination, the structural domain of power regulates the rights and responsibilities of both institutions and individuals. As outlined above, the Norwegian SDP has a long history marked by structural power differences and struggles to uphold collaborations with partners in the Global South (Straume & Steen-Johnsen, 2012), which makes intersecting power relations a suitable analytical tool. The *cultural domain of power* refers to the 'significance of ideas and culture in the organization of power relations' (Collins & Bilge, 2020, p. 8). To exemplify, the terms 'Global South' and 'Global North' do not only represent geographical locations, but also the histories of colonialism, slavery, racism and imperialism (Collins & Bilge, 2020), which continuously impact power relations in SDP (e.g. demonstrated Banda & Holmes, 2017). *The disciplinary domain of power* manages power relations through rules and regulations that are often unevenly applied to people based on social markers such as race, gender, age or nation (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Disciplinary power operates in ways in which individuals are 'disciplined' into upholding and/or challenging status quo, 'often not by overt pressure, but by ongoing disciplinary practices' (Collins & Bilge, 2020, p. 12). Lastly, *the interpersonal domain of power* refers to 'how individuals experience the convergence of structural, cultural, and disciplinary power' (Collins & Bilge, 2020, p. 15), which shapes intersecting social identities, social relations and interactions. By becoming routinised and internalised, the interpersonal domain of power often goes unnoticed in everyday interactions.

## Research methods

This study draws on data from an online survey and two focus groups with former Norwegian SDP-IVs. The survey was distributed to 288 former SDP-IVs, 91 of whom responded (45 female, 37 male, nine – undeclared gender). The two focus groups had altogether eight participants (five female, three male). Most of the survey participants and all focus groups participants were white-skinned and of Norwegian ethnicity. The participants were in service for an average of nine months. Most worked in rural settings, living with local host families, and were the only SDP-IVs in their location. However, a few were placed in organisations or in towns and cities where there were other Norwegian SDP-IVs. All participants volunteered in Southern Africa, especially Zambia (35), South Africa (27) and Namibia (20). Most had been working in non-governmental organisation, however, some had worked through government organisations (e.g. national sport councils or federations) adhering to the NIF's principles of supporting formal, national grassroot sports structures (Hasselgård, 2015). Eighty-five percent of the survey participants and six of the eight focus group participants took the study programme in 'sport, culture and development'. All focus group participants were SDP-IVs after 2015.

## Data collection

The survey consisted of 13 closed and 11 open-ended questions and provided insights into personal motivations, experiences and learning outcomes of the SDP-IVs. The open-ended questions were

designed to elicit data regarding the volunteer experience, e.g.: 'What expectations did you have of your role as a sports volunteer in advance?', 'How did you experience your time as a sports volunteer?' and 'Can you share your experiences of being part of a host family?'. The surveyed SDP-IVs were asked to participate in focus groups. Eighteen were invited and eight attended the scheduled Zoom meetings.

The topics of the two focus groups were in line with the survey, with an emphasis on questions probing the participants to share personal opinions, experiences and to promote critical thinking. The focus groups did not seek agreement between participants but aimed to encourage dialogue, listen to responses, and aid the process of a nuanced discussion. Both authors were involved in facilitating the focus groups via Zoom. With the participants' consent, the focus groups were recorded and transcribed in full by a professional transcribing service. Each focus group was conducted in Norwegian and lasted approximately 1 ½ hours.

## Data analysis

The survey data were transferred and coded in Excel and the focus groups were coded in NVivo 12. The open-ended survey questions and transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The aim was to identify themes that illuminated stories of gender, ethnicity and class in the SDP-IVs' reflections. First, both authors read the answers repeatedly to gain familiarity with the data. We then coded the data, first individually and then together, to identify segments illuminating the SDP-IVs' gender, class and/or ethnicity experiences. Next, the aim was to identify meaningful themes that remained close to the experiences of the participants. In this phase we collaboratively explored the initial individual analyses and categorisations of the data, not to check for coder agreement, but to discuss the initial interpretation of themes that better portrayed the experiences shared. The development and readjustments of the themes continued throughout the reviewing process. Finally, we identified three overarching themes: navigating SDP structures, navigating otherness, and navigating power relations. In the interpretation of the themes, we used Collins and Bilge's (2020) four domains of power as sensitising concepts (Bowen, 2020), which functioned as analytic and interpretative lenses for more in-depth interpretations of the stories shared. The concepts were not explicitly introduced in the interviews or survey but supported the exploration of the SDP-IVs' reasoning process and the interdependency of the different domains of power in the stories.

All participants were given fictive names, and identifiable features such as organisations and locations were anonymised. We refer to the focus groups as FG1 and FG2, respectively, and the survey as SU. Illustrative quotes were translated from Norwegian into English by the authors.

## Ethics and positionality

Ethics approval was granted by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. Both authors are white Norwegian middle-class women and former SDP-IVs in Southern Africa. While we do not have in-depth knowledge and experience from each individual context of the informants, we have inside experiences as Norwegian SDP-IV's navigating the SDP-IV scheme. Consequently, we are researchers working with what Coombs and Osborne (2018) called 'the insider-outsider hyphen', attempting to balance how, when and the extent to which we use our backgrounds to interpret the stories shared. In the focus groups, we were careful not to talk about our own background in advance to maintain a professional distance from the informants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Although we considered our proximity as a possible strength, since our knowledge of and experiences with the NIF's SDP scheme could add depth to our interpretations, we also acknowledged that our experiences were contextually bound, dating back 10–20 years. By reading the participants' experiences through our own lenses, we risk field blindness, where we unconsciously look for observations

that confirm our own experiences and understandings and overlook alternative interpretations (Malterud, 2017). Discussions of alternative understandings were, therefore, central to the analysis.

## Findings and discussion

The following section is structured according to the overarching themes: navigating SDP structures, navigating 'otherness' and navigating power relations. The first theme outlines SDP-IV experiences with navigating various formal and informal roles and responsibilities within larger SDP structures and cultures. The following two themes build on their experiences of engaging with local cultures, host organisations, host families and people in local communities, further illuminating how they experienced navigating disciplinary and interpersonal domains of power within larger SDP structures.

## Navigating SDP structures

The data show that the SDP-IVs used considerable time and effort in attempting to understand their role and responsibilities as NIF representatives while simultaneously navigating local cultural norms and power relations regarding gender, class and ethnicity. According to Collins and Bilge (2020), the structural domain of power regulates the rights and responsibilities of institutions and individuals by organising subordination. However, these rights and responsibilities are not always clearly defined, nor necessarily in line with SDP-IV experiences. All SDP-IVs in our study were NIF volunteers, and a majority were students in the 'sport, culture and development' programme. In line with NIF policies, the data suggest that the SDP-IVs mainly felt connected to the local organisation, which followed up on them on a daily basis. Many SDP-IVs expressed that the local organisation was crucial, that they were motivated to contribute their skills and expertise and that they experienced being a valuable resource in the organisation. However, many were given tasks that they were unqualified for and felt that their skills were not acknowledged or that the organisation was not really prepared to host volunteers.

> I felt we were almost a bit redundant. At least I felt that in the office, that I wasn't a resource they needed. Or at least they didn't know what to use me for. There were many days in the office where they worked with issues and processes that I could not take part in. (…) I am a journalist, and I enjoy taking pictures; they could have used that expertise more. (Jessica, FG2)

> [The organisation] claimed that they had looked at my CV to see what I could do, but I don't think they had. I was assigned a role as a football coach, and I have no football skills whatsoever. It was in a football academy for talents. It was hopeless. (Stephanie, FG1)

Taken together, some volunteers experienced being simultaneously positioned as experts in the community and redundant by the local organisation. The SDP-IVs' sense of redundancy can be illustrated through Richard's reflection (SU): 'I mostly felt like a kind of an attachment to *the golden calf* which was the financial support the host organisations received from the NIF'. Richard's statement points to a power relationship that functioned at several levels and on both sides of the aid relationship. First, referring to *dancing around the golden calf* – an expression of awe of materiality – he felt that the local organisations included and accepted him because of the money flowing into the project. Thus, they strategically incorporated SDP-IVs in their work to receive funding. Second, as a funder of the project, the NIF possessed a power that, in Richard's experience, set the terms for the project by facilitating SDP-IVs. Richard's quote therefore exemplifies how larger power structures and cultural histories in SDP frame and work through SDP-IVs and how such power potentially disciplines both SDP-IVs and local actors.

The data further suggest that SDP-IVs generally felt well taken care of by the NIF, which organised practical aspects in relation to the volunteer service. However, many also expressed a lack of regular contact with the NIF. Most of the time this was perceived as unproblematic as the SDP-IVs first and

foremost saw themselves as working for the local organisation. However, several SDP-IVs shared stories of situations where they had contacted the NIF to address challenges concerning the local organisation, such as financial misconduct. In some cases, the NIF chose to act on the concerns and the local organisation was held accountable. SDP-IVs with such experiences expressed relief when they alerted the NIF on an issue and were taken seriously. As Christina (FG1) put it: 'I was, in a way, heard. (…) I felt seen, that I was taken seriously, and that I had a role to play there'. Again, power became visible, this time from an SDP-IV (who showed agency) and the NIF, which was in a position to halt support based on the issues raised. This also illustrates how disciplinary power works on and through volunteers, signalling to SDP-IVs to be attentive towards their local organisation and that their opinion matters. Christina did not question the role she came to play in the situation, but through her action, she became an active agent of the regulatory modes of power enabled by funders sending SDP-IVs to receiving organisations.

As outlined above, the NIFs SDP-IV programme has since its inception been framed in collaboration between the NIF, Norwegian funding authorities and local host organisations in the Global South. Discourses regarding the role and intentions of SDP-IVs have changed from 'expert aid' to the current focus on 'volunteering for international understanding', where the cultural exchange aspects of the programme weigh more heavily than the development aid aspects. However, although the rhetoric has changed, the data suggest that within the structural domain, the SDP scheme with its deep-rooted ideas and system of subordination of organisations and the resources flowing from donors to receivers seems persistent. All the SDP-IVs in this study were NIF volunteers, thus, they had entered a field marked by a history of Global North institutions owning 'the solution to the development problem' of Global South institutions. Although SDP research illuminates unequal power relations in the structural and cultural landscape of SDP (e.g. Banda & Holmes, 2017), Global North and Global South actors continue to reproduce and sustain the inequality rather than resist or transform the long-lived structures and cultures. Related to this study, the NIF is still funded by agencies under the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and must follow official Norwegian policy discourses (Hasselgård, 2015) regarding which countries and organisations to cooperate with and about what. Consequently, the NIF's SDP-IV programme is limited by the terms set by its funders (e.g. the number of SDP-IVs in placement each year is decided based on funding). The NIF is also in charge of the selection and placement of SDP-IVs. As demonstrated by Lough and Tiessen (2018), partner organisations in the Global South often have little control over the selection of volunteers and end up hosting young volunteers with marginal to no experience, potentially explaining the SDP-IV's ambiguous stories of being recognised, or not, as experts in host organisations. However, as several researchers maintain, it would be an oversimplification of the complexity of the relationship between Global North and Global South actors to discount local host organisations' agency (Hasselgård & Straume, 2015; Lucas & Jeanes, 2020). Instead, the experiences of the study participants indicate that the host organisations used them whether or not they were qualified for tasks and even strategically as leverage in communities. One question that warrants further exploration is whether host organisations experience SDP-IVs as positive influences regarding their work. For example, Mwaanga and Prince (2016) suggested that internationally imposed initiatives are often underpinned by Northern ideals that are unrealistic for the organisation to obtain.

## Navigating 'otherness'

In exploring the SDP-IVs experiences, a common narrative was that of 'otherness', as illustrated below:

> I was the weird one down there. Even though everything was weird to me, I became the weird one (…) I was placed where there were no white people, and it was a really tough first period (…) from ten Norwegian volunteers, together, safe and sound (…) then suddenly after a few hours on a bus you were standing in the middle of Africa alone and had to try to adapt. It was really hard. (Michael, FG1)

> I had a bit of a hard time finding my place, finding friends who didn't just want to hang out with me because I had more money, who had the same interests as me. (Mina, SU)

> It was hard to make friends in the village and host family. In the village I was assigned other roles (resource person, white, female …). (Maya, SU)

These quotes illustrate how class, ethnicity and gender intersected and contributed to how the SDP-IVs positioned themselves and experienced being positioned as outsiders. In addition, they say something about how the SDP-IVs understood the others. As Michael illustrated, the feeling of being alone was related to his feeling of standing out in the community, not only based on the colour of his skin, but also in connection to an experience of ethnic and cultural otherness. In this context, we refer to ethnicity as the sense of citizenship shared with people from the same nation-state believing that 'they are related to each other and enforcing their feelings of being connected and having a common destiny [sharing] common historical memories, myths, symbols and traditions' (Bradatan et al., 2010, p. 170). Several SDP-IVs shared similar experiences of being structured by an experience of otherness in attempts to become members of the local community and host families. Mina's and Maya's quotes also show how social class and gender might have impacted the experiences of the SDP-IVs regarding otherness, and exemplified the cultural domain of power, where they experienced serving in expert roles in the community. Most of the study participants lived with local host families during their service, which was generally portrayed as intense but crucial for the SDP-IV experience. However, particularly when asked about the host family experience, they stated that they were confronted with their differences and that the complexity of the intersections between gender, class and ethnicity became evident.

> It was hard sometimes, as we had completely different thoughts and backgrounds. A bit of a cultural crash. To explain it more simply, my host family was part of the lower class. The host mother was a widow and they had lost an important source of income. It was a challenge to be myself considering the privileges I am used to as a Norwegian. (Kenneth, SU)

> [Living with a host family was] [t]he best and the worst thing about my stay. I think it was challenging for a local family to accommodate an independent Norwegian man in his mid-20s who was not so interested in curfews and reporting. (Richard, SU)

Corresponding with previous research (e.g. Dao & Chin, 2020; Darnell, 2011), our findings demonstrate that despite long-term immersion in a community and the 'volunteering for international understanding' discourse, the SDP-IVs continue to position themselves as outsiders, with social categories such as gender, class and ethnicity, individually and intersectionally, reinforcing the feeling of 'otherness'.

The data suggest that the SDP-IVs dealt with their outsider positions in various ways; however, one finding stands out: they sought comfort and company from fellow Norwegian SDP-IVs going through the same thing. The quotes below show how the SDP-IVs created a sense of connectedness by positioning themselves and being positioned as outsiders:

> The sense of togetherness, that we have the same experiences, we see and maybe get annoyed by the same things. Someone who understands what it's like to eat *nshima* [thick porridge made from finely ground corn-meal] every day. The little things that no one else understands, not the family members at home. Only those you are with in that country, or in that group, know exactly how you feel. Getting an outlet for something like that is so important. At least it was for me. Without them, it simply wouldn't have been the same. (Christina, FG1)

> It was good to just speak Norwegian for a day (…) it was lovely to see Norwegians, to chat with someone who speaks Norwegian, face to face, somewhat regularly. (Stephanie, FG1)

The volunteers expressed excitement about meeting fellow Norwegian volunteers, with whom they had bonded before the placement, on weekends and holidays, and how connecting with each other allowed them to vent their frustrations. For many, this practice was important for their well-being and the success of the volunteer experience.

There were at least two dimensions to the volunteers' description of their attempts to navigate their social position within the local communities and among fellow volunteers. First, ethnicity mattered as a common marker. Several volunteers expressed that fellow Norwegian SDP-IVs were the only ones who empathised with them, and thus, they were drawn to seeking comfort in them. For instance, when Christina said that she valued talking to someone who understood what it was like to eat *nshima* every day, she did not mean just anyone, she meant someone with whom she identified – someone with similar social identity markers and experiences of being new to eating *nshima*.

The examples above also show how *class as an economy* matters insofar as the volunteers travelled to meet each other as often as possible. Jessica illustrated the practice of meeting fellow volunteers to 'escape' life in the community:

> We used the opportunities we had to meet each other (…) There were four of us in the same city and we met each other a lot (…) we supported each other when things were difficult (…) talked about challenges in general and with living in a host family (…) it was great to have them around (…) We sometimes shared a family room at the 'Backpackers' in the city. And if any of the other volunteers came to the city, we all hung out. (Jessica, FG2)

The opportunity to leave the community and rent a room at a hostel located in the same city is reserved for those with resources. Thus, while immersed in the local culture for a long period of time, it was always from an economically privileged position. The structure of the Norwegian SDP-IV scheme, including the initial training course in Norway, is conducive to creating a collective identity, and the common experiences during placement strengthened this collective identity. According to Collins and Bilge (2020, p. 174): 'Collective consciousness emerges when people see how their individual life experiences reflect collective experiences as well as how both individual and collective identities themselves are shaped by broader social forces'. Although many of the SDP-IVs expressed a desire to feel accepted by and integrated into the host families, local communities and hosting organisations, the need to 'integrate' was not necessarily crucial, because they continued to have access to a familiar network. Through their connection with other SDP-IVs, they created their own support network and maintained a strong relationship with people from similar cultural backgrounds, which may have reinforced their experiences of being outsiders in the local culture. Thus, the interpersonal domain of power became visible, as the SDP-IVs connected in a sphere where they felt that they had greater agency and control as opposed to being in the host families where they had to accept the terms under which they lived. Importantly, the SDP-IVs did not reflect on whether the practice of seeking company from fellow Norwegians affected their work in the local community by, for instance, creating distance from colleagues in the organisation. Instead, some claimed that this was instrumental in keeping them going throughout their stay. In a study of Canadian SDP-IVs, Darnell (2010b) found that volunteers confronted with their whiteness applied strategies to manage, rather than deconstruct it, thus confirming a neo-liberal racialised project. Our findings also demonstrated that the SDP-IVs managed their positions, for instance, by strategically using the 'otherness' to enforce changes in their practical work. Additionally, otherness and misconceptions may have even been reinforced, as the volunteers sought comfort and company from fellow Norwegians, thus distancing themselves from the local community.

### *Navigating power relations*

In the focus groups, the SDP-IVs reflected on how intersecting social categories had played out in their own experiences. For instance, Michael initiated a conversation about his attempts to navigate interpersonal power relations:

> I worked in a village with hierarchical systems, where the elder men rule, even at school. To come as a white person to that place … I deliberately wore casual clothes bought at the market. Still, I had a power that was incredibly uncomfortable. For instance, if there was a big sports event and my school participated, I was invited to sit in my worn-out shorts, sweaty and disgusting, to the right of the headmaster. I'm not fond of those kind of arrangements in the first place, I like 'flat structures'. Anyway, that was the way it was. It was

really uncomfortable. The fact that I was *the white man* became such a cliche, in a way, blonde and handsome. My God, it was crazy sometimes. I didn't expect that. Maybe a little, but not as extreme as it was (…) I had power, and I could have exploited it if I was that type of person. I could have sat in meetings and said whatever I wanted. Influence. (Michael, FG1)

Michael intentionally 'dressed down' to oppose the role he felt he was given in a hierarchical system. How one dresses is important in crafting and displaying one's identity (Collins & Bilge, 2020). The data show that the SDP-IVs performed different situationally dependent gendered and class-based identities. Although they experienced being constrained by stereotypical identities, social expectations and power relations, they also reflected on their own agency by attempting to influence how they were perceived. Listening to Michael, Justin shared similar experiences:

We organised a big football tournament, and the local news were there. They hardly cared about what happened on the pitch, only that it was a white coach yelling at the players. It was strange. I remember that we [organisation] were going to visit schools. The teachers didn't seem to care about the visit, but when they saw that I was there they set the table, served biscuits and juice, and it was suddenly a bit more festive. The power I had was very uncomfortable. But in a way, it was also a bit pleasant, that I had a bit of influence, because I wanted to get things done. (Justin, FG1)

Michael followed up:

There's a lot of injustice happening when you send in your local colleagues first. When you become a bit cynical and used to it, you can help by using it for what it's worth. Towards the end of my stay, we were trying to collaborate with more schools. I was well into life there, so I deliberately went to visit these schools together with the organisation, to start the collaboration really, because I had the opportunity to do that (…) then they wanted to collaborate. (Michael, FG1)

Michael described this role as an uncomfortable privilege that he used strategically. As he illustrated, after having been in the community for some time, he believed that the chances were better for cooperation with some schools if he participated in the meetings. Thus, he positioned himself by using his privilege for what he considered to be the greater good. Justin also experienced an uncomfortable privilege related to ethnicity and gender but argued that having this power was pleasant as he was able to influence and get things moving in the direction that he deemed best. While Michael and Justin attempted to navigate social roles, they did not reflect on how their actions contributed to reinforce the privileges ascribed to them based on their gender, ethnicity and as representatives of NIF. Nor did they reflect on how the local organisation might strategically use SDP-IVs as leverage in the local community.

Based on the analysis, experiences of being in a position of power at the intersection of gender and ethnicity can be identified when Michael and Justin reflect on their relation to organisational colleagues and the wider community. In their response to Michael and Justin, Christina and Stephanie stated as follows:

Maybe it is different whether you are a man or a woman, but I didn't experience it [power related to gender]. I experienced being white and that it was a form of … But not power, in that way, but children listened to me, or came to me, or things like that. But not like I could make any decisions on a higher level. (Christina, FG1)

I felt a bit like Christina. I was in [organisation] and my role was very clear. I experienced it more on the social level. For example, in a wedding party for my host brother, there was this ceremony when you give food to the groom. And they wouldn't let us give food until they had received dollars from us because they thought we were Americans. Fortunately, someone I worked with had one dollar in her wallet, so we could continue. (Stephanie, FG1)

As Christina and Stephanie explained, while they experienced that being white and Western elicited awe, attention and specific expectations in certain situations, they did not experience that being positioned as such wielded authority or power. Although both Christina and Stephanie were careful about reading gender differences into their experiences, the conversation above also demonstrates how people experience and negotiate social categories, such as gender, according to social structures. According to Zinn and Dill (1996, p. 327), 'women and men are differently embedded in

locations created by these cross-cutting hierarchies. As a result, women and men throughout the social order experience different forms of privilege and subordination, depending on their race, class, gender, and sexuality'. Limited critical reflection that reinforces misconceptions about global development is central in the critique of IV programmes (Clarke & Norman, 2021; Simpson, 2004). This points to research suggesting that SDP-IVs are uncritical about their work and unaware of how they maintain power imbalances (Darnell, 2007). As Lucas and Jeanes (2020) demonstrated, the SDP-IVs reflected on their experiences and wanted to contribute to meaningful development efforts but were often hampered by organisational challenges such as a lack of the previous experiences and frameworks. Also, Darnell (2010a) found that SDP-IVs actively and critically negotiated and challenged the ideologies that underpinned SDP, but were rarely encouraged to question the structures facilitating it. To some extent, the SDP-IVs in our study reflected critically on their roles and positions in the local community. As Richard (SU) expressed, 'I am still of the opinion that we [the SDP-IVs] gave our host organisations little in return in terms of resources or intrinsic value'. It is possible to explain this critical reflexivity by pointing out that almost all the participants were students pursuing courses focused on critical and reflective discussions regarding development aid in general and their own SDP practices in particular. Additionally, for many of the SDP-IVs in the study, especially those surveyed, the experience was in the distant past, and reflections might have since matured. However, the critical reflections seemed to centre on giving meaning to the project on an individual level rather than discussing the effects of personal behaviour on a structural level. Our findings correlate somewhat with those of Giulianotti et al. (2021), who, found strong degrees of critical reflexivity regarding programme activities and constraints and the limited capacity of SDP volunteers. However, they argued that further critical reflectivity should be nurtured and developed in SDP policies and practices.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we utilised an intersectional approach to further understand how stories of gender, ethnicity and class intersect in Norwegian SDP-IV's experiences of working in the Global South as part of the NIF's SDP scheme.

The results suggest that SDP-IVs actively negotiated their roles and positions in local communities across the social categories of class, ethnicity and gender and that perceived differences shaped the patterns of advantage and disadvantage experienced. They navigated and managed interpersonal power relations, for instance, by strategically using their 'otherness' to enforce changes in their practical work or marking their distance from the local community by seeking companionship with fellow Norwegian SDP-IVs. The stories also illuminate how disciplinary domains of power work on and through the volunteers by framing their roles and relationships in the organisation and within the local community. Furthermore, structural relations in larger SDP schemes positioned the SDP-IVs as regulatory agents of power, enabled by funders sending them to receiving organisations. The data suggest that many of the SDP-IVs critically reflected on the uncomfortable privilege experienced in certain situations as well as notions of their own limited contribution to host organisations. However, they seldom questioned how their actions might have contributed to upholding unequal power relations.

The NIF has been the primary Norwegian actor, and one of the leading actors internationally, sending Global North SDP-IVs to partner organisations in the Global South. This concurs with the increasing awareness of international development volunteering, encouraging young people to be agents of global change (Schech et al., 2020). According to Collins and Bilge (2020), structural and cultural power relations rely on durable (though somewhat changing) organisational cultures and practices. Working in the SDP sector means working within a politicised field characterised by persistent barriers from a colonial system. Unique to our data is a longitudinal perspective, with testimonies from SDP-IVs over a period of nearly 25 years. The study contributes to knowledge of the long-lived interconnectedness of different domains of power at play within SDP. One aspect of this is

the cultural history of the NIF's SDP-IV scheme, exemplified by the combined discourses of sport for development and cultural exchange. This paper has demonstrated that this combination creates tensions and role ambiguity for SDP-IVs.

Several scholars have called for critically informed SDP-IV training in advance of and after placements (e.g. Darnell, 2011; Forde, 2015; Giulianotti, et al., 2021). We agree that thorough training is necessary and that critical reflections regarding roles and positionalities during placements are crucial. However, as our study shows, even with critically informed 'luggage', the SDP-IV experience, like the degree of critical reflection, is individual in nature. As long as the Global North SDP volunteer scheme is sustained, a strengthened SDP-IV programme design and individual follow-up before, during and after placements should be prioritised by sending and receiving organisations and partners.

This paper has investigated the Norwegian SDP-IV scheme from the perspectives of Global North volunteers. While strengthened SDP-IV programme design and individual follow-up might positively impact their work in local organizations, it is important to bear in mind that the SDP-IVs are part of and, in several ways, subordinated by a larger and politicized SDP field. This field has long been criticised for underpinning power and privilege (as demonstrated by Darnell (2010a) more than a decade ago).

In addition to critical research on volunteer training programmes, we call for more research exploring the perspectives of receiving organisations in the Global South as well as the experiences of SDP-IVs from the Global South volunteering in Global North contexts (Schech et al., 2020). Moreover, researchers should continue to unpack broader political, economic, and cultural relations of dominance that contribute to uphold inequality within global SDP structures in general, and SDP-IV schemes in particular.

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## Disclosure statement

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