

REPAIR
THE WORLD

The Worth of What They Do

The Impact of Short-term Immersive
Jewish Service-Learning on Host Communities

An Exploratory Study



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Host Communities: An Exploratory Study

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Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

Study Purpose

In 2010 Repair the World commissioned BTW *informing change* to conduct an exploratory study about the impacts of short-term immersive Jewish service-learning (IJSL) on the organizations and communities that host these groups. The short-term IJSL program model combines full-time direct service for one to two weeks in response to genuine and unmet community needs, with structured learning and time for reflection placed in a rich context of Jewish education and values.

The study was designed to capture how a host community's experience with short-term IJSL programs affected the community from the perspective of the leaders of the community based organizations/non-governmental organizations (CBO/NGO) in those communities. To date, relatively little research has examined the benefits and unintended consequences on a community from groups of youth and young adults visiting to conduct short-term service-learning projects. While this study is not designed as an evaluation of IJSL programs, Repair the World expects that the findings of this study will spur further research of the practice.

Study Design

Staff from five organizations with substantial experience offering short-term IJSL programs selected the host communities and the individuals within those host communities to interview about their perception of the community's experience. In most cases these individuals were CBO or NGO representatives who were closely involved with the IJSL project in their communities.

Repair the World and BTW were aware of the potential for bias in collecting data for this study due to the power dynamics inherent in relationships between IJSL organizations and host community NGOs/CBOs. In many cases the IJSL organization is a major source of financial and other resources for a project in a host community. The interview protocol and

IJSL Organizations Participating in Study

- American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC)
- American Jewish World Service (AJWS)
- Hillel International
- Jewish Funds for Justice (JFSJ)
- Yeshiva University's Center for the Jewish Future (YU)

“Is the trip a good investment or [should they] just give this money for poor people here? I would host two or three trips during the year instead of taking the money. What happens from the trip is more important than just giving another \$10–\$20 to a poor family.... It is not charity that you give and then it's gone. We are planting a seed, it will grow and will become bigger in many ways.”

—In-country
IJSL Representative

interviewer training were designed to help mitigate against this bias, and as a result, the researchers believe that these particular host community informants did feel comfortable sharing their true experiences.

BTW conducted a total of 18 confidential interviews in English, Hebrew, Spanish or Russian. Thirteen interviews were with host community representatives and in-country representatives of IJSL organizations—five U.S., three in Israel, five international—and five interviews were with staff of IJSL organizations participating in this study.

This study was designed to focus on host communities that have had excellent multi-year relationships with experienced IJSL organizations. As such, the findings represent current practices in use in successful programs and are not generalizable to all short-term IJSL programs. The findings apply equally to domestic, international and Israel-based programs that provide a range of services.

IMPACT ON COMMUNITIES

Overarching Finding

The key finding of the study is that when the host communities in this study have had positive experiences hosting short-term IJSL projects, their **success was tied to practices and partnerships put into place by IJSL organizations.**

When short-term IJSL projects are done right—meaning that the potential negative impacts are anticipated and proactively addressed—**positive impacts predominate.** Despite widely held beliefs among observers of service-learning that short-term immersive service projects leave the door open to incomplete projects and negative impacts, the host communities in this study were very clear that impacts at the community level over the long term have been only beneficial to the community. While many host community representatives in this study can cite examples of specific negative individual experiences, when considering the impact on the community as a whole, these representatives report no lasting negative effects on their communities from short-term IJSL projects.

Short-Term Outcomes

The host communities included in this study experienced a number of immediate positive outcomes as a result of hosting IJSL volunteers. The IJSL projects met host community expectations for **completing concrete, discrete tasks** such as renovating a classroom or constructing a latrine. Communities also found other immediate, yet unanticipated, benefits, including **jumpstarting residents** into participating in community service, developing **community leaders**, receiving **resources** that would otherwise

have been unavailable to the community and providing an opportunity for a **rich cultural exchange** between community members and volunteers.

“We have general rules here in [this country]— we don’t expect ladies or girls to work on village projects. And then we see the American girls—they mix the mortar, they are doing the hard work just like the men.. After the Americans leave, the community knows that women can do more. They are seeing their women and girls with different eyes. The [IJSL volunteers] have given our women a new place of honor.”

—Host Community
CBO/NGO
Representative

“It is not enough for an organization to have the will for this work. An organization also needs human resources, a proper team with knowledge, and a strong organizational structure.”

—Host Community
CBO/NGO
Representative

Longer Lasting Impacts

A longer lasting positive impact, which may or may not have been anticipated by the host community, was the expansion of the **communities’ capacity** to address ongoing needs; short-term IJSL projects expanded some community assets that could be sustained in the community after the volunteer’s returned home. Among the indicators of enhanced community capacity cited were new knowledge, strengthened intra-community communications and more effective leaders.

CURRENT PRACTICES

Successful Current Practices

In the high-performing partnerships between the host communities and IJSL organizations in this study, the partners have a shared understanding of what it takes for a project to be successful. Successful projects are characterized by **shared vision and values** of the host site organization and the IJSL organization, **shared realistic expectations** of what can be accomplished in a short-term IJSL project, consistent **communication** and personal connection between the host community and an individual staff member at the IJSL organization, and **shared decision making** processes.

Host Community Readiness

To reap the most positive benefits, host community representatives included in this study identified that the host NGO/CBO, along with others in the host community, need sufficient time and staff capacity for **advance planning** and a **stable structure** for the project’s implementation. Host communities need an understanding of the **limitations of volunteers**, as well as a good **relationship between the on-the-ground NGO/CBO and community residents**.

The IJSL practitioners included in this study agreed with these characteristics and identified a few additional elements needed by the host community for success, including flexibility in working with schedules of volunteers, a person in authority in the community to be involved in projects, adherence to safety criteria, an understanding of service-learning and familiarity with the mission of the IJSL organization.

IJSL Organization Readiness

The host communities included in this study also identified what IJSL organizations need to have in place for short-term IJSL projects to have

positive community impacts. They report that IJSL organizations need a commitment and adequate resources to thoroughly **prepare student volunteers** prior to the trip. Ideally the student volunteers are open, reliable, willing to learn and work hard, and eager to connect with the host community. IJSL organizations also need to provide **well trained, well prepared group leaders** as well as a good curriculum built around learning goals for the group leaders to implement. In addition, host communities identified the need for **sensitivity to the financial constraints** of host communities and **flexibility** and **humility** on the part of the IJSL organization.

The IJSL practitioners included in this study agreed with these factors and identified three additional indicators of organizational readiness for operating short-term IJSL programs: clear, enforced safety policies; a thorough screening process to identify the right participants; and a process for ongoing organizational reflection about how to meet needs of the host communities.

CHALLENGES

Host communities choose to continue to engage in short-term IJSL projects because of the benefits they experience, but the projects and partnerships are not without challenges. Some challenges inherent to short-term IJSL will remain no matter how well IJSL practitioners and host community partners work together. Other challenges can be significantly minimized by good practices.

Challenges inherent to short-term IJSL programs include a steep learning curve in the first year of a project, time limits on what can be finished or accomplished, difficulty in parting at the time of the volunteers' departure, and shifts in priorities or funding decisions within the IJSL organizations.

Other challenges of short-term IJSL projects can be addressed by good planning and management and by paying attention to the lessons learned by other IJSL programs. These challenges include providing accommodations for volunteers, addressing language barriers and building the cultural competency of the volunteers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

The findings of the study raise some important implications that extend beyond any single program or organization and instead speak to the nature and capacity of the short-term IJSL program model. The full report includes implications for the field of IJSL and for Repair the World, along with suggestions for further research on the impact of IJSL on host communities.

“The only thing it would be best to avoid—but how?—is the difficulty of separation at the end of the week of volunteering.”

—Host Community
CBO/NGO
Representative