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Colonial Tendencies of Voluntourism:
A Postcolonial Analysis of Weltwärts Testimonials

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Abstract

Voluntourism is often described as a sustainable development strategy facilitating Global Learning and cross-cultural exchange. Initiated by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the voluntourism program Weltwärts strives to create stronger international partnerships, development engagement and equitable encounters. The practice of voluntourism is contested, however, with critiques arguing that it has the tendency to reinforce unequal relationships between the *Global South* and the *global north*. This derives from the colonial legacies influencing development and, thus, voluntourism, whose everlasting effects shape a subjective perception of reality navigated by a Eurocentric perspective and hegemony of the *west*. This research analyses 16 testimonials of Weltwärts volunteers through a postcolonial lens to examine the ways in which voluntourism perpetuates colonial and racist tendencies. Including specifically the concepts of the Coloniality of Power, Orientalism, and White Saviourism, the analysis shows that the assumption of *western* superiority frequently guides the volunteers' thoughts and actions. Although having good-hearted intentions, the volunteers tend to subconsciously position themselves as superior to the people they are engaging in. The testimonials often draw on colonial discourses creating a dichotomy between the *global north* and the *Global South* in which the former represents rationality and modernity, while the latter compromises the opposite: difficulties and chaos. A lack of qualification of the volunteers furthermore illustrates the assumption of *white* and *western* superiority guiding voluntourism projects. Portraying the volunteers as bearers of relevant knowledge, this reinforces asymmetric development narratives and perpetuates the oppression and discrimination of people from and places in the *Global South*. This research thus highlights the necessity to address colonial continuity and *race* within voluntourism. It urges development researchers and practitioners to consider the implications of their positionalities and to create a more just understanding of development by highlighting the perspective of the *Global South*.

Keywords: Voluntourism, Weltwärts, Development, Postcolonial Theory, Coloniality of Power, Orientalism, *white* Saviorism

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Abbreviations

UN	United Nations
BMZ	German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development
DEval	German Institute for Development Evaluation
BIPoC	Black, Indigenous and People of Colour

1. Introduction

According to the United Nations (UN) “volunteerism is a powerful force and an important part of the fabric of society“(UN Volunteers, 2022). In recent years volunteer tourism – voluntourism for short – has become a significant form of volunteering within the development context. It describes the trend of volunteers originating in the *global north*¹ travelling to the *Global South*² to participate in momentary ‘developmental’ projects. Volunteers spend a few months at a time living and working as part of a local community in the *Global South*, assisting with tasks such as giving language lessons, building and renovating schools or community centres, supporting health- and childcare initiatives, or helping with preserving native wildlife (Calkin, 2014). Wearing (2001) defines voluntourism as “a development strategy leading to sustainable development and centring the convergence of natural resource qualities, locals and the visitor that all benefit from tourism activity” (cited in Bandyopadhyay, 2019:330). Voluntourism is recognised as a valuable experience of personal growth as well as cultural exchange and is often seen as an asset for career advancement in the *global north*. It is further not unusual that past volunteers aim to work within aspects of the development sector in the future; it could therefore be argued that voluntourism has become a seed for development work.

Germany, as the OECD’s second largest Development Assistance Committee Donor in 2021, offers a variety of state-supported voluntourism opportunities within development work (Worldbank, 2021; AKLÜH, 2019a). It is relatively common for young Germans to take a year off after high school and go to places in the *Global South* to volunteer and travel. In 2019, a total of 7,209 volunteers were registered going abroad, 94% of whom chose state-supported projects for their volunteer experience (AKLÜH, 2019a). The German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) offers the biggest and most popular voluntourism program: Weltwärts (roughly translating to ‘into the direction of the world’). About half of the volunteers

¹ *global north*, *west* and *western* are written in italics because they describe not only a geographical location but a political and economic position which is privileged in the global system. The terms describe institutions that use their privilege and power to – consciously and unconsciously – oppress and discriminate against non-*western* regions and people. In an attempt to move against this unequal power relationship, these terms are written in lowercase.

² *Global South* is written in italics because it describes not only a geographical location but a political and economic position which is disadvantaged in the global system. It furthermore regards people and places that have experienced colonialism and exploitation.

choosing state-supported programs volunteer within Weltwärts projects (AKLÜH, 2019a). Although the number of volunteers going abroad has decreased in recent years due to the Covid-19 pandemic, Weltwärts continues to facilitate the voluntourism experience of thousands (AKLÜH, 2020). According to Weltwärts (n.d.a), its projects intend to form sustainable relationships between people from all around the world, creating “mutual learning and stronger international partnerships [...] development engagement, global learning, and equitable encounters”.

Nevertheless, criticism has emerged surrounding the benefits of Weltwärts and voluntourism in general. For instance, the number of volunteers coming to Germany through Weltwärts, or other programs is significantly lower than that of those going abroad (AKLÜH, 2019b). Furthermore, encounters do not tend to happen as between equals since the volunteers – predominantly *white*³ teenagers, stemming from middle to upper-class families, having obtained a rather high degree of education – often work within projects supporting socially disadvantaged racialised groups. People going abroad wanting to do ‘good’ thereby risk reinforcing the existing problems of colonial domination and oppression. For this reason, voluntourism is an interesting subject of investigation in that it can highlight aspects of racism and unequal power relations present in development.

1.1 Relevance, Purpose and Aims

Kothari (2006) claims that it is essential to examine the continuity of colonial influence and racism in development to make it a more just endeavour. She argues that “*race*⁴, although often hidden, operates at different levels and is open to interpretation and articulation by diverse actors in varied spaces” (Kothari, 2006, p. 10). Voluntourism is only one of these spaces, yet I believe it to be an especially interesting one as it has guided me and many of my classmates towards studying and working within the development field. This research has, therefore, not only become an academic but somewhat personal matter. Looking more closely at the influence of (*white* and *western*) privilege and the unequal power relations maintaining it can offer a new perspective on the world we live in (Ogette, 2020, p. 17). It displays that topics of inequality are easily overlooked because

³ *White* is written in italics because does not describe merely the color of skin, but rather a socially privileged position in a hierarchical and racist system. It is a social construction that is often seen as the norm in comparison to the ‘others’.

⁴ *Race* is a political construct and not based on biological reasoning, it is therefore written in italics.

they usually function to our benefit (here referring primarily to *white* people from the *global north*) (Gümüşay, 2021, p. 23). This research aims to give me and its readers a broader insight into the existence of limits as well as biases of knowledge, that relate to the *western* perception of reality. This might offer an opportunity to view voluntourism and development from a critical perspective, decolonising the rather Eurocentric perspective of the *Global South* present in academia and beyond. Decolonising knowledge is a complex project that calls for addressing global inequalities by “questioning continuing colonial power imbalances, power dependencies, and colonial legacies” (Glück, 2018, p. 1). In a personal sense, decolonisation thus requires challenging our privilege and understanding of the world according to colonial influences. This paper could thereby function as a step in the direction of taking responsibility for our role in asymmetric development narratives marked by *western* domination. Without this critical dialogue, the dividing line between the *Global South* and the *global north* will most likely remain as it is, and development will continue to be generally seen as the ‘development of others’ (Werther & Schudy, 2021).

These are big ambitions for the scope of this paper. It is, therefore, necessary to narrow down the focus, and looking at the specific case of Weltwärts makes this possible. More concretely this paper thus seeks to discuss the manner in which Weltwärts, although striving to create space for intercultural relationships and Global Learning, contributes to colonial and racist⁵ structures shaping development. The study implements a qualitative content analysis of text written by Weltwärts volunteers reflecting on their experience. Postcolonial theory provides the analytical lens, taking specifically the theoretical concepts of the Coloniality of Power, Orientalism, Othering, and White Saviourism into consideration. The research is therefore guided by the following question:

In what ways does voluntourism perpetuate colonial and racist tendencies?

The analysis deliberates whether genuine cross-cultural exchange is viable in the context of voluntourism or if, instead, it reinforces asymmetrical relations between the *Global South* and the

⁵ Racism is here understood not as a single problem or caused by individual actors but rather as historically grown hierarchical system in which people as prescribed characteristics and discriminated against based on their origin and body features.

global north. To discuss this still rather abstract question, the research examines the way volunteers display Eurocentric attitudes in their reflections on their experience. Specifically, it analyses how the volunteers' thought patterns are guided by *western* values, thereby subconsciously portraying an unequal and patronising perspective of the *Global South*. On this basis, the following sub-question has been chosen:

How do volunteers reflect their positionality in the context of Weltwärts?

1.2 Limitations

This research comes with various limitations. To begin with, it offers only a partial perspective of a larger issue and is therefore not able to address colonial influences and racism in development in their complexity. It might even only touch upon the very tip of an iceberg that is subject to multiple opinions and discussions in contemporary development research. Adopting a postcolonial perspective, the investigation is from the start driven by the assumption that voluntourism and development are and always have been influenced by their colonial history. Accordingly, it is generally critical of the unequal power relations guiding its goals and ambitions. Therefore, the research is not, nor does it try to be, fully objective. Nevertheless, a thorough theoretical background, as well as an array of relevant literatures, acts as a backbone and broaden the reliability of the paper.

Furthermore, there are multiple limitations brought about by my position as a researcher. It is important to recognise that I am *white*, I am privileged, and I have been socialised through a *western* understanding of the world. I have not experienced racism and cannot possibly comprehend it in all its intricacy. Detecting the volunteers' biases within the analysis is, therefore, not always easy or obvious. While this paper contributes to an unlearning of discriminatory thought patterns, this change of perception should be seen as an ongoing process which takes a constant practice of reflexivity and an open mind in order not to fall back into old habits of thought (Kontzi, 2022). Therefore, I rely on established postcolonial theoretical tools to guide my analysis of the volunteers' testimonials. Reflecting on this position as well as on my pre-understanding of the topic at hand throughout the entirety of the research process, assist in reducing the bias emerging from my own influence (Bengtsson, 2016).

Finally, this analysis did not have the capacity to collect the perspective of persons from the *Global South*. It is, therefore, yet another paper highlighting the voices of the *global north* and urges future research to consider another side of the picture.

1.3 Disposition

To accurately discuss the research questions, this paper is structured into six main sections. Succeeding the introductory section, a review of relevant studies on voluntourism highlighting its examined benefits as well as criticisms. This section furthermore investigates research on the Weltwärts program, specifically considering previous studies with a postcolonial framework. The subsequent section describes the conceptual background as well as theoretical tools for the analysis, giving an insight into the perspective of the postcolonial theory guiding this research. Following this, the methods section explains the research design as well as methodological limitations and ethical considerations of this study. The analysis then presents and discusses the empirical findings relating them to relevant theory and the reviewed literature. Finally, the conclusion summarises the findings and provides implications and questions arising from this research, thus discussing suggestions for future research.

2. Previous Studies

The following section reviews the current state of research on the topic of voluntourism and specifically the Weltwärts program. To understand the implications and relevance of the topic, the literature review begins by broadly highlighting benefits as well as criticisms of voluntourism before moving on to the specific case of Weltwärts.

2.1 Benefits of Voluntourism

Up until recently, much of the academic work about voluntourism has focused on its benefits, with multiple studies discussing the perspective of the volunteers. Analysing the transformative aspect of voluntourism, Magrizos, Kostopolous, and Powers (2020), for instance, find that travels such as these offer a chance for self-development and growth among volunteers. Drawing on Campbell's (1998) model describing the 'process of a hero's adventure', the study discusses the volunteers' transformation along three stages. It begins with a desire for adventure, followed by a trip involving hardships, overcoming fears, and gathering new perspectives, and concludes with

the volunteer returning home rich in bearing experiences. Magrizos, Kostopolous, and Powers (2020, p. 889) claim that a transformation of character arises especially when experiences are perceived as genuine and involve a “high degree of immersiveness”. The transformative experience of voluntourism is assumed to not only have sustainable effects on changing individuals’ lifestyles but also in assisting development projects long-term. This includes former volunteers being more inclined to donate or contribute otherwise to development and aid programs. McIntosh and Zahra (2007, p. 118) similarly find that voluntourism trips “were not 'traditional' tourism experiences; they were life-changing”. They effectively lead people to focus more on others rather than solely on themselves, generating newfound perspectives on life. Participants claim that their travels inspired them to ‘be a better person’, to disregard material consumerism and surface interactions, and instead engage in more meaningful relationships (McIntosh and Zahra, 2007). McIntosh and Zahra (2007) thus portray voluntourism as visualising the importance of giving back, thereby influencing the perception of a meaningful life for many (ex-) volunteers.

Concerning the perspective of hosting projects Wearing and Ponting (2009) suggest that voluntourism benefits local communities in the *Global South* because it offers an opportunity to break down notions of cultural imperialism. In creating “a more equitable distribution of power” between locals and tourists, the authors see possibilities for genuine cultural exchange (Wearing and Ponting 2009, p. 264). If executed accordingly, voluntourism, therefore, seems able to create a space in which both groups learn from one another. Similarities and differences can be discussed and understood, creating a hybridisation of culture grounded in respect (Wearing and Ponting, 2009). Volunteers and hosts are then able to transform representations concerning the ‘other’ vs. the self into a new paradigm representing togetherness and support, moving beyond the cultural hegemony of the *west*. Host communities furthermore benefit from the “social value” of “experiential interactions” by gaining greater representation in the international sphere (Wearing and Ponting 2009, p. 257). Raising the voices of local communities and development projects, this is viewed to contribute to changing the exploitive relationship between the *Global South* and the *global north*, between the locals and the tourists, into a more self-empowering one in which equal cross-cultural cooperation is possible.

2.2 Criticism of Voluntourism

More recently, however, critical analyses of voluntourism have emerged, displaying that the topic is more complex than the altruistic yet equalising scheme it claims to be. Revising relevant literature, Guttentag (2009) summarises the negative effects of voluntourism into four themes; 1. Neglect of locals' desires, 2. Hindering of work progress and the completion of unsatisfactory work, 3. A decreased labour demand and a promotion of dependency, and 4. Conceptualisations of the 'other' and poverty rationalisations.

Regarding the first theme Guttentag (2009, p. 540) suggests that volunteers' motivations and longing for "self-gratification" frequently overshadow actual development needs. Fulfilling the volunteers' expectations is essential for the success of many projects that cannot afford paid labour and therefore require volunteer work. Yet what drives people to volunteer abroad is often something different than simply generosity. This coincides with Robinson's (2015) research on volunteers' motivations, which shows that volunteers frequently see themselves as a 'giver' of valuable time and resources, expecting reciprocity for their actions. As voluntourism is part of the tourist market, it becomes most important to consider what sells best; to accommodate the interests of the buyer (here, the volunteer) over the actual development project goals. Examining advertisements for voluntourism experiences makes this especially clear. Volunteering trips to Guatemala, Malawi, or Zambia are, for instance, often publicised as an opportunity to get "far away from mass tourism" and to 'help others' (Cerbière, 2020, p. 18). However, at the same time voluntourism programs include safaris or other common tourist attractions to fulfil the volunteers' excitement for adventure (Calkin, 2014). Local perspectives and concerns are thus pushed into the background, leading to rather short-term development outcomes that benefit the volunteers more than the project.

Themes two and three of Guttentag's (2009) analysis relate to the fact that volunteers are often unqualified for the tasks at hand in a given project. This causes work not only to be completed unsatisfactorily and prolonging the process but further takes away opportunities for specialised locals who are better qualified for the job. Guttentag (2009, drawing on Pearce 1980) argues that work for volunteers should never coincide with labour that paid locals could complete. In reality, however, this is often the case. Since volunteers coming from the *global north* do not require

monetary payment or oftentimes even pay for their volunteer experience, it is impossible for local workers to compete. Over time volunteers might further gain the recognition of being seen as experts, placing *western* knowledge above local expertise. Voluntourism programs can therefore contribute to reinforcing dependency on “economic support” between the *Global South* and the *global north*, interfering in local markets and economic structures (Guttentag, 2009; McGhee and Andereck, 2008). Dependency is further created when voluntourism projects target marginalised and poor people for essential needs such as health care. It is then that people in the *Global South* become reliant on *western* projects and foreigners to preserve their well-being (Anderson, Larios, and Kim 2017).

Creating equal *South-north* relationships through voluntourism that break dependent ties, empower the *Global South*, and facilitate cultural exchange is, therefore, complicated and seldomly the case. Not the least because it frequently includes conceptualisations of the ‘other’ and poverty rationalisations – Guttentag’s (2009) last theme of analysis. Here his research focuses mostly on the demonstration effect and faith-motivated missions. The former describes how, specifically, young locals are often swayed by the wealth of the volunteers, creating jealousy and unachievable aspirations. The latter relates to religious voluntourism programs that intend to spread Christian beliefs, thereby undermining fair, cultural exchange. What falls short in Guttentag’s (2009) analysis, however, is a more nuanced inquiry about the creation of difference through the mechanism of ‘othering’. Doerr (2015), for example, argues that volunteering not only includes but *is* ‘othering’ in the sense that it is defined as ‘helping others’, thereby performatively constructing difference from the beginning. This distances volunteers from the ones ‘being helped’, creating borders that can reinforce class and even *race*-based inequalities. Within voluntourism, these inequalities are undoubtedly guided by the colonial continuity present in the development paradigm. Here the aspect of racism becomes relevant. As Schech et al. (2015, p. 263) suggest, “the encounter between volunteers and host organisations is ‘inevitably racialised’ and susceptible to confirming existing aid hierarchies”. The separation between us and them, volunteers and locals, the *west* and the ‘rest’ can thus lead to stigmatising stereotypes and relations that do more harm than good. It is this topic that this thesis touches upon, focusing on the question of the ways in which voluntourism negatively impacts the *Global South* by perpetuating racialised and colonial relationships and representations.

2.3 Weltwärts

To better analyse the implications of voluntourism, this paper investigates the specific case of Weltwärts, the voluntourism program initiated by the German BMZ. Kontzi's (2015) postcolonial analysis of Weltwärts is especially relevant to the analysis. Focusing on the pilot phase of the Weltwärts 2008-2010, Kontzi (2015) examined the website and flyers of Weltwärts, publications by the BMZ, media articles, and brochures about the program, testimonials of past volunteers and observations collected at various seminars and lectures. Her thorough discourse analysis discusses the positionality of volunteers in the context of Weltwärts. Kontzi (2015) finds that Weltwärts is grounded in the idea of 'helping' the *Global South*. This paternalistic view places volunteers –90% of whom are high school graduates and thus socially well-positioned individuals – in direct contrast to the projects they are engaging in. The program and its volunteers depict Germany as the role model for modernity (and without deficits), guiding the 'developing nations', represented as a homogenous group, towards progress. This legitimises the interference of the *west* and its volunteers, crowning them as experts of valuable knowledge. The aspect of Global Learning, therefore, becomes unidirectional, further facilitating the active subjectivisation of the volunteers as opposed to the passive objectivation of the locals. Concluding her analysis, Kontzi (2015, p. 228) argues that "the fundamental orientation towards the concept of sustainable development and the education for sustainable development pursued in the context of Weltwärts does not contribute to global-societal justice but confirms existing power relations and injustice"⁶.

This statement is furthermore supported by Buckendahl (2012) and Haas (2012). Cooperating with and interviewing employees of a Tanzanian partner organisation Buckendahl (2012) deduces that Weltwärts is a program that perpetuates global inequalities. Participants express discontent with their position in the program, feeling as though they are simply seen as receivers, having to take whatever Weltwärts and its volunteers deem important. Little competence of the volunteers combined with ignorance of their positionality require intense mentoring and training and oftentimes compromise more work rather than help the organisation. Haas (2012) similarly argues that the idea of 'helping others' through Weltwärts facilitates unidirectional flows of knowledge toward development projects, thereby reinforcing the positioning of the *global north* above the

⁶ This and all following translations from German originals are done by me, the researcher.

Global South. Haas (2012) proposes multiple suggestions to improve Weltwärts, such as providing a postcolonial perspective when preparing and supporting the volunteers throughout their experience as well as better inclusion of the partner organisations in the *Global South*.

Reacting to criticisms, the BMZ has since then revised and developed Weltwärts. Starting in 2014, the program has begun offering a *South-North* component that makes it possible for people from the *Global South* to volunteer in Germany (Weltwärts, n.d.b). This aims to create space for more omnidirectional flows of knowledge and support. Most recent studies about Weltwärts have primarily focused on this aspect of the program (see Skoruppa, 2018; Huffer, 2020; Wittmann, 2021). Following an evaluation from the German Institute for Development Evaluation (DEval) in 2017, the program has furthermore attempted to distance itself from the discourse of ‘helping’ the *Global South* by focusing instead on the concept of Global Learning (Polak, Guffler, and Scheinert, 2017). Defined as “learning that promotes global sustainable development”, Global Learning is tightly connected to the 2030 Agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals (Weltwärts, n.d.b.; Polak, Guffler, and Scheinert, 2017). To facilitate the Global Learning of the volunteers, Weltwärts carries out mandatory preparation seminars for the volunteers, including topics such as the reflection on their own role as international volunteers, an introduction to development policy issues, and a discussion of stereotypes, racism, and colonialism (Weltwärts, n.d.c). Emphasising the need to learn from one another collectively and including the expertise of the *Global South* into multiple features of the program, Weltwärts has thereby, in comparison to other voluntourism programs, rather comprehensively tried to address its postcolonial critique (Haas and Richter, 2019).

It has, however, yet to be discussed whether these changes contributed to Weltwärts volunteers genuinely gaining a better understanding of their positionality, whether the traditional *North-South* component of the program is now truly able to promote Global Learning or if it instead still reinforces asymmetrical relationships with and representations of the *Global South*. Analysing testimonials of volunteers who did Weltwärts between 2018 and 2022, this paper aims to offer a timely perspective on this issue. The research question guiding this thesis is, therefore, *how do volunteers reflect their positionality in the context of Weltwärts?* Concentrating on the way in which volunteers position themselves in the voluntourism and developmental context, aiming to

visualise their general understanding and representation of themselves in comparison to the *Global South*. This furthermore gives insight into the larger issue concerning the question: *In what ways does voluntourism perpetuate colonial and racist tendencies?*

3. Theoretical Framework

Inspired by the studies discussed above, this paper adopts a postcolonial theoretical framework to better understand the relations of inequity and power within voluntourism and development in general. In this context, the prefix “post-” does not indicate the end of colonialism but rather its ongoing influence on the present, both for the former colonised and colonisers, as well as their interrelation. Postcolonial theory is useful in investigating the positionality of voluntourists as it portrays a critical view of the global hierarchy. It considers aspects of power surrounding international relationships and “refuses to acknowledge the superiority of *western* cultures” (Robert Young, 2003, cited in Bandyopadhyay and Patil 2017, p. 646). Highlighting the manner in which relationships between the *Global South* and the *global north* are characterised by *western* domination volunteerism can thus offer an example of the wider postcolonial critique surrounding development.

To better clarify the background and implications of colonialism and, specifically, the colonial discourse for voluntourism, this theoretical framework begins by explaining the establishment and continuity of discriminatory and racist discourses within development before moving on to the concepts of the Coloniality of Power, Orientalism, and White Saviourism. These are valuable tools for the analysis as they question the power dynamics influencing the representation of the *Global South* and highlight the extent to which discrimination has always been and still is a significant aspect of development and hence voluntourism.

3.1 The Establishment and Continuity of Colonial Discourses in Development

In his essay *The West and The Rest* Hall (1992) analyses the establishment of difference along the *South-North* divide through colonisation. He claims that European colonisation – mainly Christopher Columbus’ ‘discovery’ of the Americas between 1492 to 1502 and the Portuguese ‘explorations’ along the African coast from 1430 to 1498, later on, followed by the ‘Scramble for Africa’ in the late 19th and early 20th century – were not only the beginning of globalisation and

the interconnection between *Global South* and *global north*. They were also the very start of the *western* understanding of the non-European world and have influenced the way in which the *Global South* has been portrayed ever since.

When Europeans discovered the *New World*⁷, they used their “own cultural categories, languages, images, and ideas” to make sense of it (Hall, 1992, p. 204). The clear ambition for the *New World* was to make it become part of the old world, the *west*. The relationship between the two was, therefore, since the beginning, driven by European control and self-interest. Discourses that describe local societies as supposedly backwards were used to legitimise their robbery, disempowerment, and exploitation. It justified imposing ‘aid’ on the colonised to ‘civilise’ them, as they were deemed ‘incapable of doing so themselves’. Unable to comprehend the value of difference, crude simplifications and stereotypes emerged of the ‘discovered’ people and places (Hall, 1992). Racism acted as a means of distinction and discrimination in picking out specific physical characteristics (mainly the colour of skin), merging them into a supposed group, and prescribing specific features, behaviours, ways of thinking, advantages, or deficits to people on their basis (Bendix et al., 2013). Purely geographical identities such as Spanish, Dutch, or South African obtained a racial character and were utilised for social stratification. Through colonisation, “*race* became the fundamental criterion for the distribution of the world population into ranks, places, and roles in the new society’s structure of power” (Quijano, 2000, p. 535). Racism legitimised the exploitation of labour and land, thereby strengthening Europe’s control and profits of the global capitalist economy.

According to Kothari (2006), development discourse deriving in the 20th century gave rise to a more subtle description of racism. It derived from and superseded the rather direct discriminations based on biological differences and laid culture as grounds for disparities. Development became a synonym for modernity, rationality, and knowledge, and culture came to explain the means to measure its achievability. Post-independence, the relationships between the *global north* and the *Global South* thereby changed from “coloniser and colonised” to “developer and developing”, to

⁷ *New World* describes a *western* discourse used in colonial times to describe the continent ‘found’ by European journeys in the 15th century. The term is written in italics to show that it is not an objective but rather discriminatory description, as the continent and its societies were not ‘new’ or ‘discovered’ but existed before the European arrival.

giving support and receiving aid, to expertise and need for knowledge (Kothari, 2006, p. 12). Various scholars argue that the structure of dependency nevertheless stayed the same; “*western* notions of development simply equate to new forms of (postcolonial) subjugation, and notions of progress to capitalist-driven economic advantage rather than cultural, social or spiritual betterment and wellbeing” (Bennett, 2012, p. 976). Although *race* is no longer the obvious determinant for difference within development, its underlying influence still guides its every aspect. This is due to development being grounded in the idea of linearity, placing certain cultures, societies, and places (i.e. the *Global South*) at the beginning and others (i.e. the *global north*) at the end of the path to success. The *Global South* is seen as an issue that must be fixed regarding the idea of modernity (Bennett, 2012). What is essential is that this idea, the understanding of “modernity, progress, morality, and civility”, is not neutral (Kothari, 2006, p. 13). In contemporary development, this knowledge is predominantly shaped by *white* and *western* scholars, politicians, and employees. Kothari (2006) claims that because of that, *white* people are continuously taken more seriously in development not only by *western* aid organizations but also by local agencies. The degree of success within development work, be it collecting donations, being seen as an expert, or building practical networks, is, therefore, evidently influenced by the colour of skin.

3.2 Eurocentrism and the Coloniality of Power

Western knowledge and cultures have gained and maintained their alleged superiority through what Quijano (2000) termed the Coloniality of Power. In this concept, Quijano (2000) explains the continuing effect of unequal power distributions shaping the relationship between the *Global South* and the *global north* according to two factors: 1. The establishment of capitalism as a world system built on the exploitation of the *Global South*, and 2. The perspective of Eurocentric knowledge being the only indisputable truth. Colonialism was, therefore, not only a political or economic endeavour but furthermore an ideological and cultural project. It suppressed indigenous knowledge production, “models of the production of meaning, their symbolic universe, the model of expression and of objectification and subjectivity” (Quijano, 2000, p. 541). Instead, *western* norms and values were imposed onto the colonised to sustain the dominance of Europe. As described above, the perspective of *western* supremacy was derived from the illusion that Europeans were biologically, hence ‘racially’, superior to the rest. Characteristics such as being rational and modern were considered purely European; Europeanism was the future worth striving

for, and everything or everyone else was considered secondary. It was this angle through which *westerners* came to understand the *Global South* and non-*westerners* came to understand themselves. The legacy of colonialism, therefore, to this day shapes global knowledge systems and interpretations of truth. It is, then, the *western* understanding of the *Global South* – although not necessarily portraying reality – that shapes its reality into existence.

The importance of addressing the ideological dimensions of colonialism is similarly highlighted by Spivak (1988). Spivak (1988) claims that reality portrays a one-sided and Eurocentric perspective because the Subaltern – historically marginalised and oppressed voices – have been and still are made invisible in dominant discourse. What she deems important here is that this silencing is institutional and that addressing the matter is thus complex. It is nearly impossible for the Subaltern to speak as the existing discourse, reproduced by institutions such as universities, media, and the state, does not include their experience. The power structures in place, therefore, actively exclude the Subaltern's viewpoint. Spivak's (1988) argument raises the question of whether society's perception of reality would change if it included marginalised voices. How would, for instance, the *Global South* look if the Subaltern could speak? It shows that positionality is essential in the production of knowledge. And that it has been the *white* and *western* position that has dominated knowledge production thus far. "It is hegemony, rather than the result of cultural hegemony, at work" that strengthens the persistence and power of *western* knowledge (Said, 1978, p. 7)

3.3 Orientalism

Departing from these concepts of Eurocentrism and the Coloniality of Power, it is the dominant (*western*) culture through which the world of 'others' is defined. In his famous work, *Orientalism*, Said (1978) theorises exactly what this looks like in practice and what implications it has in terms of inequitable power structures. He identifies Orientalism as a set of constraints imposed on thought and actions that shape the Orient into existence. It both derived from and, at the same time, legitimised colonialism in the first place. Said (1978, p. 40) argues that "what gave the Oriental's world its intelligibility and identity was not the result of his own efforts but rather the whole complex series of manipulations by which the Orient was defined by the *west*". Tales, experiences, and manuscripts of the 'explorers' build up an archive that is still frequently used in the *west* when

describing non-*western* people and places. Colonisation has thereby created a knowledge system using a language that applies racist labels and external (*western*) designations for the colonised and their descendants: the ‘others’.

3.3.1 Othering

‘Othering’ as a principle takes the perspective of the observer as viewing themselves as the norm and thereby constructing everything and everyone else as the ‘others’ (Ogette, 2020, p. 59). In this process, spaces are distinguished according to familiarity as ‘ours’ versus ‘theirs’. The ‘others’ need not acknowledge nor agree with this distinction for it to become valid. To create difference within their conscience requires merely the observer’s own perception (Said, 1978, pp. 54-55). ‘Othering’ is not a purely *western* concept but is present within all societies. According to Said (1978, p. 67), it is “perfectly natural for the human mind to resist [...] untreated strangeness”. Societies are, therefore, prone to interpret and thereby transform unknown cultures through their own sets of values in order to make sense of them. What is distinct about the *western* perspective is that it is supported by power that not only positions itself apart from but superior to ‘other’. This perspective differentiates along ‘geographical otherness’ (Staszak, 2008). Various spatial regions, cultures, and countries are put together and judged as one homogenous group. A line of distinction is thereby drawn between Europe and Asia, and Africa; between ‘the *west* and the rest’ (Hall, 1992). Characteristics are ascribed to these geographical positions through a binary logic in which one contrasts the other; While the *global north* is modern, organised, and efficient, the *Global South* must be primitive, lazy, and emotional. Constructions of the ‘other’ therefore, greatly influenced the continuity of racist discourses and understandings (Ogette, 2020, p. 59). Said (1978, p. 204) furthermore argues that because the Orient was weaker than the *west* the world began equating the “Orient’s difference with its weakness”. The ‘discovery’ of the ‘other’ thereby undoubtedly shaped the identity and stability of the *global north*. It made it possible for the *west* to contrast and compare, to view itself as a role model that must mentor the inferior ‘other’ (Said, 1978, p. 3; Ogette, 2020, p. 53).

3.3.2 Exoticisation and White Saviourism

Exoticism is a concept tightly intertwined with ‘othering’ and orientalism in that it describes an enchantment with the unknown. Although seemingly harmless and flattering at first sight, exoticism is deeply influenced by racist and sexist social structures (Danielzig and Bendix, 2010). The concept itself similarly derives from unequal power relations originating in colonial times and relies on a ‘white gaze’ that objectifies people of colour (Danielzig and Bendix, 2010). By equalising attributes such as being lazy, animalistic, emotional, erotic, and exotic with a people, colonisers justified their conquest and occupation of unknown regions. Taking their whiteness as a norm and tip of the social hierarchy, they ascribed to ‘discovered people’ all the characteristics they forbade from themselves, and that portrayed the opposite of their reasonable and civilised definition of humanity. Discovered regions and people were seen as wild and untamed, requiring them to be saved by knights in shining armour (the colonisers) (Bandyopadhyay, 2019). Exoticising the ‘other’ – the *Global South* – is, therefore, a deeply Eurocentric viewpoint and still exists today. It is nowadays often described as the White Saviour Complex, and voluntourism plays precisely into these discourses.

The term White Saviour Industrial Complex was first used by Cole (2012), reacting to the Kony 2012 controversy⁸. Cole (2012) criticises white saviours for neglecting historical relevance as well as the complexity of injustice, that is, the global system, in their actions. Simply going to the *Global South* to create change reflects ignorance towards the agency of the people at place, portraying them as incapable of helping themselves. Not only does this disregard the strength and activism of the people in the *Global South* who have continuously fought for improvement, but it further simplifies developmental issues. It entitles white people from the *west* to intervene without reflecting their privilege and role in the systematic oppression of the *Global South* (Cole, 2012).

⁸ In 2012 filmmaker Jason Russell and the NGO Invisible children released a video and outcall for awareness about Ugandan guerrilla leader Josef Kony. Aiming to take down Kony and rescue African Children from the suffering he caused, the video reached millions of views and a vast amount of public attention (Bal et al., 2013). While gaining a lot of positive feedback the video also received ample criticism. Critiques argued that it simplified the issue at hand and was simply a cause for validating the feeling of *white* people to have done something ‘good’ in helping the children in need (Cole, 2012)

Nevertheless, Bandyopadhyay (2019, p. 331) shows that in the *global north* still, “western (male) aggression is valued for its ability to endure the hardships of life while helping the deprived.” Volunteers, usually privileged young adults stemming from the *global north*, travel to and endure hardship in the *Global South* to ‘rescue’ people of colour from the burden of poverty (Robinson, 2015). Throughout the process of voluntourism, it is, however, often forgotten how this burden of poverty originated in the first place and how it is connected to volunteers’ position in the global social hierarchy (Bandyopadhyay, 2019). Describing a place and a people through an exoticised and white saviour lens, voluntourism, therefore, contributes to reinforcing stigmatising stereotypes and helps maintain an unequal and exploitive social world order.

3.3.3 Latent Orientalism

The Orientalist discrimination towards the Orient as well as the *Global South*, occurring through speech, thought, and action, is, however, not always easily detectable. Said (1978) distinguishes between two types of practices of Orientalism. While *manifest* Orientalism describes “the various (rather obvious) stated views about Orient society, languages, literatures, history, sociology and so forth,” *latent* Orientalism acts as the underlying ideology guiding their validity (Said, 1978, p. 206). *Latent* Orientalism thus exists more subconsciously, making it far less graspable and providing it with an invisible yet durable strength. *Latent* Orientalism navigates the everchanging arguments of the Orient while staying a rather constant concept itself. It is the very fundament of knowledge about the Orient that influences its every representation. Being grounded in the understanding of the Orient as a backward and uncivilised *race*, culture and society, *latent* Orientalism has an undeniably racial character. Similar to other peoples deemed as secondary, Orientals are, in this view, continuously overlooked, “analysed not as citizens or even as people but rather as problems to be solved or confined” (Said, 1978, p. 207). Socialised through a *western* perspective of the world, people of the *global north* are likely to grow up with a knowledge system entrenched by latent Orientalism. In this context, they predictably subconsciously reproduce the colonial discourse and alleged supremacy of the *west*. *Latent* Orientalism is thus a valuable theoretical tool for the following analysis.

4. Methods

Content analysis was chosen as the methodological framework for the empirical analysis of this research. Originally developed as a rather quantitative method, content analysis is generally used to examine written documents, including, among others, “published reports, newspapers, adverts, books, web pages, [and] journals“ (Prior, 2020, p. 542). More recently, the material accessible for content analysis has extended to non-written data such as films, photographs, comics, radio, or tv shows (Robson and McCartan, 2016, p. 352). Oftentimes content analysis is understood as a means to systemically quantify existing text in order to draw generalisable conclusions for a particular issue. In social sciences, however, it has come to be used more qualitatively, analysing language and themes rather than quantities to derive realistic understandings of the meaning generated by the data (Bengtsson, 2016).

This research follows the qualitative aspect of content analysis. More precisely, the analysis applies abductive and deductive reasoning to perform a latent content analysis. Facilitating the familiarisation of relevant literature and diverse aspects of postcolonial theory, abduction assists in limiting the biased perception of myself, the researcher, by presenting a new perspective on reality. It allows for “question[ing] the taken for granted and zoom in on what is distinct in the empirical materials” (Tavory and Timmermans, 2019, p. 11). Abduction, therefore, functions as the first stage in the research process to find possible codes and hypotheses emerging from the testimonials. By itself, abduction is, however, not sufficient in reliably answering the research questions (Tavory and Timmermans, 2019). Therefore, the codes emerging from abduction are analysed through deductive reasoning guided by the postcolonial theoretical framework. This is furthermore helpful in relating the findings to previous research on the topic of voluntourism (Elo and Kyngäs, 2017).

The latent approach to the analysis assists in visualising the interpretive aspect of the data by analysing its underlying rather than apparent meanings (Bengtsson, 2016). In the case of this research, latent content analysis is useful to understand the subconscious influences that affect the thought patterns of the volunteers. It highlights how their positionality is related to wider aspects of racism and colonial tendencies, thereby giving an opportunity to analyse the issue on a more abstract scale. In this sense, latent content analysis is similar and sometimes interconnects with

discourse analysis (Prior, 2000, p. 543). Nevertheless, due to the scope of this paper, content rather than discourse analysis was chosen as the method for this investigation.

4.1 Data Selection and Sampling

This paper examines the text of testimonials written by volunteers who were part of the Weltwärts program. These reports were sampled from the website of AFS Germany. AFS is one of the largest organisations to offer international exchanges and volunteer services and cooperates with the BMZ to facilitate the *North-South* component of Weltwärts (AFS, n.d.). On its website, AFS publicly publishes testimonials of volunteers who have completed their experience abroad. These testimonials are, therefore, interesting for two reasons. On the one hand, they are used as promotion for Weltwärts and AFS, aiming to attract other young adults to the program. And on the other, they offer insights into the perspective of the volunteers on their experience after completion. The testimonials display the volunteers' understanding of their trip as well as their representation of the *Global South*. In this way, the volunteers are often presented as authentic and credible experts, passing on their knowledge about the unknown, be it people or places. This can be dangerous because it shows the partnering projects of Weltwärts only in light of the volunteers understanding. According to Said (1978, p. 203), travel reports are able to reinforce constraints of discriminatory knowledge systems such as Orientalism. It was for this reason that the testimonials were chosen as data to analyse the ways in which voluntourism maintains colonial structures.

This research is a case study. Although it can be used instrumentally regarding the larger issues of voluntourism and development, this study has its limits and therefore functions within a “bounded system” (Punch, 2005, p. 145). Analysing testimonials of the Weltwärts offers primarily an insight into the colonial tendencies of this specific program. Nevertheless, Weltwärts was chosen as a case for the analysis because it comprises the most popular and complex volunteering program in Germany (AKLÜH, 2019a; Haas and Richter, 2019). As described above, it is one of few programs that has actively responded to postcolonial critique and is, therefore, an example of a volunteer service trying to offer genuine intercultural exchange. Because of that, Weltwärts is an especially interesting case to investigate from a postcolonial perspective. What is furthermore relevant is that Weltwärts is a state-supported program. Analysing other volunteering programs, specifically private for-profit organisations might generate different results.

As content analysis does not offer a distinct method of data collection, purposive sampling was used to select the data for the analysis (Prior, 2020, p. 563). The testimonials were narrowed down according to two factors: the type of experience – only testimonials regarding Weltwärts were selected, leaving aside other volunteer or school exchange programs – and the timeframe. Since the last evaluation of Weltwärts occurred in 2017, leading to various changes in the program, testimonials written and published between 2018 and 2022 were chosen for the analysis (see *Table 1*). Testimonials from 2018, dominate the data in terms of quantity because the pandemic and its restrictions starting in 2020 significantly reduced the number of people going abroad for volunteer projects. There is a gap in data for 2020 and 2021 as AFS did not publish any testimonials of people doing Weltwärts during those years. Within the sampling, there was no direct distinction made in terms of different types of volunteer activities, gender, or hosting countries because the focus of the research is on voluntourism and relations between the *Global South* and the *global north* as a whole rather than specific projects and cooperations. Volunteer activities described in the testimonials comprised social projects surrounding kids and schools, a project working with people with intellectual disability, volunteering in a hospital, and sustainability and nature conservation projects. As colonial structures are an essential aspect of this study, the analysis includes only testimonials of volunteers' experiences within a countries that were once colonized by Europe.

Table 1: Frequency Table of Weltwärts Testimonials Published on the Website of AFS Germany

Year	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Quantity	11	2	-	-	3

To confirm the reliability as well as check the data protection of the testimonials, AFS was contacted prior to the analysis. The organisation confirmed that its website shows the testimonials of all volunteers who gave their consent to the publication of their text. It is, therefore, safe to assume that the testimonials are not filtered according to certain specifications but that they offer a variety of experiences and reflections.

4.2 Methodological Limitations

Methodological limitations of content analysis include, for instance, the reliability of the documents used. As the testimonials examined in this analysis were not specifically written for the purpose of this research, their availability, as well as the texts themselves, are exposed to biases and distortions (Robson and McCartan, 2016, p. 357). Accordingly, content analysis is often used only as a supplementary or secondary method within research (Robson and McCartan, 2016, p. 352). Adopting it as the only method of this research may therefore present challenges and deficiencies. Since content analysis is rather flexible and often involves a variety of text, there is a risk for the analysis to become unclear and chaotic. It is thus essential to consider the research questions and aims of the study at every step of the process (Elo and Kyngäs, 2017).

Furthermore, the latent aspect of this analysis produces results within a rather high-inference system (Robson and McCartan, 2016, p. 354). Subjectivity and biases of the researcher can thus be significant limitations and the researcher's positionality must constantly be reflected. Attaining a fully objective analysis is nearly impossible, as internalised norms, biases, and thought patterns are what this paper is essentially about. Assumptions deriving from the researcher's morals and political standpoint could create contradictions between this analysis and more traditional understandings of research. Allowing the research to be guided by its findings, and reporting objectively on those, however, reduce the possibility of falling into a leading rhetoric throughout the investigation (Scheyvens, 2014, p. 64).

Accessing the testimonials via AFS creates objectivity towards the volunteers in limiting interaction or knowledge about their character. However, the sampled testimonials are written in German, and throughout the translation of the testimonials to English done by the researcher, it is possible that certain nuances of the text may have gotten lost. Since this study analyses the specific case of Weltwärts and uses a rather small sample, it can achieve only a hypothetical generalizability of the topic. This is not uncommon for qualitative studies, which tend to sample limited yet in-depth data (Bengtsson, 2016). The complexity of the structuring of Weltwärts offers, however, some representation of the wider voluntourism paradigm. The extent to which this study is applicable to more general development concerns is speculative, but it surely offers at least an example and raises questions about its coloniality. Careful consideration and comparison of data,

literature, and theory attempt to ameliorate the limitations of this study by promoting the internal and external validity of this research.

4.3 Ethical Considerations

Contemplating ethical considerations is essential for this as well as any study. This analysis aims to critically assess discriminating thought patterns and representations of the *Global South*. As it seeks to contribute to a more just knowledge production, it is a priority to, at no cost, harm anyone involved. This includes assessing ethical matters and practising reflexivity throughout the entirety of the process. Beginning with an ethical self-evaluation as developed by LUMID (2021) shows that this study is at ‘minimal risk’ of becoming ethically questionable. The research furthermore involves constant reflection on “self, process, and representation, and critically examining power relations and politics in the research process, and researcher accountability in data collection and interpretation” (Sultana, 2007, p. 376 cited in Scheyvens 2014, p. 62).

When analysing publicly accessible volunteer testimonials, special permission to use the data is generally not required, and ownership of the data is not a barrier to the analysis. Furthermore, content analysis can be considered an unobtrusive technique with a low risk of harm. Working with already existing material, the testimonials and its volunteers are not performatively affected by the analysis (Robson and McCartan, 2016, p. 350). If, however, a source is considered private and without open access, informed consent of the owners is always necessary (Scheyvens 2014, pp. 83-85). To double-check the public ownership so as not to break any data security issues, AFS was contacted and gave permission to use their published testimonials for the research.

Nevertheless, the anonymity of the volunteers is established to protect the individuals. Pseudonyms are used in the analysis to illustrate their experiences. As the testimonials are published online, it is, however, not possible to guarantee anonymity fully. It is, therefore, important to bear in mind that this study is not intended to be a critical analysis of the volunteers themselves or to harm them in any way. This paper concerns the structures that are influencing voluntourism, assessing the ways in which postcolonial dimensions navigate this industry. It is not about individual actions but about the responsibility of the development paradigm to deconstruct barriers of colonial tendencies and racism within voluntourism. Therefore, the volunteers must be

accurately represented and must not be personally blamed in any way within the analysis. To do so, the research is careful as not to take any quotes out of context or misrepresent the volunteers' perspective but to examine the data impartially and according to the ethical standards of authentic representation discussed by Scheyvens (2014, pp. 83-85).

5. Analysis and Discussion

In their testimonials, most volunteers describe Weltwärts as a cultural exchange in which they were able to get to know different people and places. In offering opportunities to gain new perspectives, the volunteers claim that Weltwärts has increased their capacity to create more tolerant and open-minded perceptions, combating prejudices and stereotypes. This idea is often defined as Global Learning, a far-reaching and beneficial result attributed to volunteering abroad. Within the testimonials, there exists a consensus that voluntourism specifically, and development, more generally, must involve mutual relationships in which both sides learn and benefit equally. This perception is in line with the advertisement and concept of Weltwärts, which strives to create “mutual learning and stronger international partnerships [...] stand[ing] for development engagement, global learning, and equitable encounters” (Weltwärts, n.d).

The postcolonial analysis of the data, however, identifies different elements of Weltwärts that put into question the equality of voluntourism. It highlights the latent aspect of what (Said, 1978) coined orientalist thinking that acts within the volunteers. Although having good-hearted intentions when engaging in Weltwärts, the volunteers frequently fall into discriminating narratives guided by a Eurocentric subconscious. This derives from colonial structures and mechanisms of *western* power guiding their thought patterns (Quijano, 2000). The following section presents and discusses the findings of the content analysis guided by a postcolonial lens. Through thorough reading and note-taking, four themes could be identified that are useful in guiding this research towards its aims: Differences and Deficits, White Saviours, Language and Qualifications, and *white/western* Superiority. These themes are not mutually exclusive and do overlap each other, as all regard the colonial tendencies of the examined testimonials.

5.1 Differences and Deficits

Contrasting of differences is a theme common in various Weltwärts testimonials. The volunteers present this specifically when reflecting upon their first perception of the place they were volunteering in. Be it in India, Cameroon, Ghana or Paraguay, the volunteers describe it as if everything there seems new. Extremes and deficits are listed, highlighting their sense of adventure and strength of perseverance. From this narrative, A dichotomy between Germany and the hosting countries derives. The *Global South* and the *global north* are posed as opposites, in which Germany represents organisation and tranquillity while the ‘other’ symbolises adventure and chaos. The following excerpts aim to serve as an example of this differentiation:

At first, these crowds, the traffic, the noise and all these smells were exciting; with time, they became exhausting, and often I wished I could go back to the quiet sidewalks in Germany. I found it annoying to be approached on the street, in the market, in the cab, but over time I learned to take it in stride. By now, I miss the hustle and bustle, the euphoria. (Ronja)⁹

Germany is generally considered to be an extremely organised country, people are very punctual and everyone strictly follows the rules, [...] As I got to know Peru, it is the complete opposite. The first thing that catches your eye is of course, the "chaos". At the market, everyone shouts wildly, negotiates prices loudly, the individual stalls are not neatly arranged next to each other, horns are constantly honked on the street, seat belts are not used as a matter of principle, people like to drive with the door open, and so on. In the beginning, I felt completely overwhelmed, but over time I learned to love this chaos. (Maria)

These statements visualise how the binary and contrasting logic of ‘othering’ is applied. According to Said (1978) ‘othering’ is a mechanism of Orientalism in that it applies external labels guided by *western* bias to define people and places in the Orient. In the context of Weltwärts, this theory explains how the volunteers judge their hosting countries as well as the *Global South* more generally through a Eurocentric lens. It implies that the volunteers position themselves and Germany as the norm, and everything deviating from it as the ‘other’. A line of distinction is drawn between ‘the *west* and the rest’, allowing for social stratification according to value-laden differences (Hall, 1992). By posing, for instance, Peru as the “complete opposite” of Germany,

⁹ Volunteers' names have been changed for anonymisation purposes.

Maria falls precisely into this discourse. She describes Germany as organised and punctual, while Peru represents chaos and excitement. Ronja similarly illustrates how she misses the tranquillity in Germany as compared to the “hustle and bustle” in Cameroon. This contrast can be discriminative because it implies that the *Global South* is negligible. The connotation of chaos is rather similar to the discourse of ‘uncivilised’ used in colonial times to justify interference (Hall, 1992). Depicting the *west* as inherently superior and a role model for rationality, efficiency, and modernity, it associated the *Global South* with backwardness and ‘underdevelopment’, thereby defining it through its weaknesses and disparities (Said, 1978, p. 204).

This distinction does not happen merely consciously. Many of the volunteers, in fact, reflect this *western* subjectivity and their limited knowledge of what can be deemed “normal”. Lina, for instance, writes that throughout her volunteer work, she understood that her “own way of life (like [she] know[s] it from Germany/Europe) is not the ‘normal’ “. This change in perception could be attributed to Global Learning and cross-cultural understanding. Nevertheless, subconsciously, latently, a derogatory differentiation often remains. Many volunteers dedicate paragraphs to highlight deficits found throughout their voluntourism experience. The house of Emelie’s host family feels “cramped” and “overpopulated”; her room is small and dark. Nona, Ronja and Finn struggle without running water, having to “shower with a small bowl”. For Lina, the food is too spicy, and Louise must adjust to “eating the same dish almost every day”. These statements can appear stigmatising and racist in that they reduce the ‘others’ to their scarcity and poverty, failing to mention the variety that exists within the *Global South* (Bendix et al., 2013). Without addressing historical and colonial power relations, it presents poverty as natural or an outcome of bad luck, disregarding the complexity of global development (Cole, 2012).

5.2 white Saviours

Multiple testimonials show how perceptions changed over time throughout the Weltwärts experience and how the volunteers adapted to the “new normal”. The expression ‘*sich gewöhnen*’ i.e. ‘*getting used to*’ is used by 12 out of 16 volunteers to describe this change. On the one hand, the change of perception can be regarded as a successful cultural exchange. The volunteers realise their biases and Eurocentric vision of what is considered valuable and necessary in everyday life. Their volunteer experiences are, therefore, rather self-transformative. This view is consistent with

McIntosh and Zahra (2007) as well as Magrizos, Kostopolous, and Powers (2020), who demonstrate the aspect of personal growth through tourism. Yet, on the other hand, this newfound perspective still focuses on differences instead of possible parallels distancing the host country and Germany, the locals and the volunteers from one another. This is often tied to volunteers presenting themselves as individuals faced with hardship, positioning them to an extent as a heroine who must overcome certain challenges to achieve a specific goal. In turn, this portrays the *Global South* as an adventure the volunteers decide to take on.

The concept of White Saviorism can be a tool to explain this phenomenon. The volunteer endures difficulties and personal burdens to ‘rescue’ the people (specifically children) at place (Bandyopadhyay, 2019). The following excerpt depicts this especially clearly:

I sometimes felt powerless at the mercy of their [the nuns] rules and bossing around. There was a clear hierarchy, and even though they said that I was one of their colleagues, I did not feel treated and valued as such. Instead, I built up a wonderful bond with the children and kept reminding myself that I was doing all this just for them, to brighten up their everyday lives. (Katharina)

The local employees (here, nuns) are presented as unloving and adopting a strict education. At the same time, Katharina positions herself as the morally superior, caring heroine, going through discomfort only for the sake of the children. Her own gain from this voluntourism experience is not mentioned. She does not reflect on her privilege nor the implications of her position regarding the work with children (Bandyopadhyay, 2019).

Katharina is no isolated case. The white saviour aspect of *Weltwärts* is facilitated by 11 of the 16 examined testimonials revolving around volunteer projects with children. This not only insinuates that teaching and caring for children does not require a lot of skills but, furthermore, builds on the fragility of children and the *western* desire to ‘help them’ (Bandyopadhyay 2019). It positions the volunteers as a valuable influence on the children’s knowledge and understanding of the world. Specifically, the volunteers’ *whiteness* and *westernness* are regarded as beneficial. Nona, for instance, describes how as a volunteer, she was able to “convey [her] values to them [the children]”, while Finn claims that his *Weltwärts* experience was “successful and enriching [...] for

the children, for whom it is now normal to talk to a *white* man”. These arguments reinforce the coloniality of power influencing relationships between the volunteers and the locals as well as between the *Global South* and the *global north* (Quijano, 2000). The local knowledge and perspectives are portrayed as insufficient in explaining reality. This falls into an orientalist pattern by prescribing *Western* knowledge as superior and representing the *white* volunteer as a knowledgeable hero (Said, 1978).

Interestingly, Weltwärts advertises itself as critically preparing volunteers on such topics. When AFS was contacted for this research, the organisation reassured that their volunteer programs were certainly not white-saviour projects. The investigation of different testimonials showed that, indeed some volunteers do contemplate the sustainable and problematic aspects of their impact while reflecting on their positionality:

Certainly, no Weltwärts volunteer will go home with the feeling of having saved the world, that would be quite wrong. (Louise)

Building close and intimate relationships with small children who have already suffered difficult fates in this respect, and then suddenly just disappearing again without really being able to explain to a 2-year-old why, has a bitter aftertaste. So, saying goodbye was by no means easy for me. Nevertheless, I believe that in this case, any help is urgently needed because 20 children simply cannot be cared for sufficiently by 2 Tías. Unfortunately, there is no perfect solution. (Angelina)

The first excerpt illustrates that Louise believes Weltwärts to prepare their volunteers accurately so as not to fall into the white saviour rhetoric, reflecting that the program is not intended for the volunteers to ‘save the world’. Angelina similarly deliberates on the difficulties that arise from volunteering and specifically working around children for a year. However, the latter statement still displays the white saviour complex in neglecting the locals' agency (Cole, 2012). Although Angelina does not see herself as the “perfect solution”, she positions herself as the rather obvious person to address this issue. This suggests ignorance towards the ‘others’ capabilities and perhaps more reasonable solutions that could support them. Instead, it draws almost invisibly on the *white* sense of superiority (Said, 1978, p. 207). Because of their privilege, their *western* superiority volunteers see themselves as qualified to step in when help is needed.

Reflecting upon their own *Weltwärts* testimonials, Stark and Weber (2012) argue that their preparatory seminars about discrimination only heightened this overestimation of the self. The seminars made them feel as if they were now sufficiently educated and were, therefore, inherently free of racist or biased thought patterns. This furthermore simplifies the complexities in place and takes away the responsibility of the volunteers or the *global north* to accurately address inequalities (Cole, 2012). Similarly, the testimonials show that many volunteers realise that perhaps *Weltwärts* and their own position do not come without faults, but they still believe to contribute value by ‘helping out’.

Focusing on the differences and deficits as well as the hardships that they persevered as ‘*white saviours*’, the testimonials of the volunteers thereby reflect colonial tendencies. This aligns with the findings of previous literature, which has found that *Weltwärts* reinforces existing power relations by facilitating rather unidirectional flows of knowledge and support from the *global north* to the *Global South* (Kontzi, 2012; Haas, 2012). The *Global South* is thus often presented as a problem full of differences that need to be fixed. On the one hand, many volunteers describe coming to adapt to the difference and begin questioning their perception of normality. This distances them from the colonial discourse, moving closer to the possibilities for cross-cultural exchange and understanding of subjectivity. Yet on the other hand, this narrative still serves to represent the *Global South* as an adventure for the volunteer to discover and pursue. The thought patterns of the volunteers thus seem guided by what can be explained through latent orientalism (Said, 1978, p. 206). Underlying understandings of the *Global South* that derive from the volunteers’ Eurocentric socialisation influence their thoughts and actions throughout their experience abroad. The data shows that this is not easily addressed, and that preparatory seminars, as well as voluntourism projects themselves, cannot fully break down barriers of prejudices and racism.

5.3 Language and Qualifications

Another theme found consistently throughout the testimonials is the aspect of Language and Qualifications. Beginning with Language, 11 of the 15 volunteers whose testimonials this study examined described having no prior knowledge of the local language. Many said to get by well

with English which is an official language of some hosting countries, due to their colonial history. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether honest and diverse learning of other cultures is possible without understanding day-to-day conversations in the local languages. Additionally, encounters between locals and volunteers are not necessarily equitable if they must refer to a colonial language. Drawing on Spivak (1988), it could be suggested that this reinforces dominant and colonial discourses as the English language is built upon a subjective and Eurocentric perspective. Obligating people to adopt this language in conversations may portray only a selective perception of reality based on the *western* norm. This, in turn, can marginalise people falling out of the said norm and strengthen the oppression caused by the coloniality of power of the *global north* (Quijano, 2000). However, it is important to consider that Spanish and Portuguese are also colonial, thus biased languages and are nevertheless often regarded as local in the context of Latin America (although Latin America additionally hosts a variety of indigenous languages). Still, most volunteers did not know Spanish before they arrived in Latin America either.

Accordingly, many volunteers describe how conversations and volunteer work, in general, were particularly challenging at the beginning due to communication barriers. Timo, for example, expresses that in the first weeks, he “communicated with hands and feet and with the help of the Google translator since almost no one spoke English”. While the volunteers often adapted to and partly learn the local language over time, this lack of relevant knowledge on the volunteers’ side inhibits the extent to which genuine and constructive encounter is possible. Ben claims that “over time, [his] understanding improved really quickly”. However, he goes on to say that “[he] had no other choice since no one spoke English”. With statements such as these, both Timo and Ben are able to uphold their own superiority despite their inability to comprehend the local language. This visualises a sense of Orientalism by framing the locals as ‘other’ with less competence (Said, 1978) Timo and Ben make the ‘other’ responsible for the difficulties in communication instead of questioning their own ignorance of non-colonial languages. These examples highlight the difficulty of creating honest and open encounters in voluntourism projects.

Furthermore, merely two of the 16 volunteers had occupational qualifications for the field they volunteered in. The rest had recently finished high school and had not yet acquired a specific skill

set. Various volunteers reflect on the difficulties regarding the lack of experience, specifically within projects involving children, in their testimonials:

I found it difficult to enforce authority and discipline. A degree in Education would have been better preparation for that than my youth leader licence (Lina).

In sole responsibility, I often felt overwhelmed and no longer knew how to keep the class of 28 children under control at a rather difficult age. In the end, after a week alone with my class, I was so desperate that I came crying to my principal's office, [...] As a result, my principal personally took over my class for the rest of the day (Laura).

These accounts insinuate that the volunteers feel overwhelmed by their responsibilities because they are underqualified for the tasks at hand. Although they seem to be aware of this positionality, the question arises whether volunteers are, in fact, helpful to local organisations or if they cause merely more work. Without including the perspective of the local projects, it is difficult to address this issue fully, and this analysis might paint only half of the picture. However, similar to Buckendahl's (2012) findings, many testimonials display that the volunteers require quite a lot of training and support before contributing valuably. The example above mentions how the principal needed to take over the class as Laura could not teach it alone. She further illustrates that the principal took time to teach them what to do next time.

[She] sat down with me the next day for a very, very long conversation (at least 3 hours), gave me tips and listened to my perspective, and worked with me to find solutions to my problems in school, as well as outside of school (Laura).

Therefore, working hours had to be used to accommodate and train the volunteer. Only after that, Laura felt more comfortable and could more appropriately support the school. This implies the time-consuming work going into mentoring the volunteers. Not all projects have the capacity to facilitate this. Many volunteers who do not get this training from their local organisation described feeling redundant. Nona “felt very unwelcome from the part of the teachers and had the feeling that they [the school] did not know what to do with [her]”, Timo “got more and more bored [...] because the English teachers often had no use for [him]”, and Lina felt that she had to “create space for volunteer work” herself, because “the School did not provide tasks for volunteers”. These statements contrast the ones above in that the volunteers feel under-challenged and bored, yet all

these excerpts suggest the same issue; the volunteers are ill-prepared or unfit for the tasks that are needed. Thereby presenting rather a burden than true help, the volunteers might not be welcomed or properly integrated. This relates to Guttentags' (2012) analysis in which he claims that unqualified volunteers not only tend to complete tasks unsatisfactorily and prolong the process but further take away opportunities for specialised locals who are much better qualified. It implies that the partnerships between Weltwärts and the local projects do not mutually benefit everyone. Louise contemplates that as Weltwärts volunteers, they "gave, but also took a lot away during the year". In the cases described above, however, it seems that these relationships were imbalanced as volunteers receive considerably more learning and experience than they are able to contribute.

5.4 *white/western* Superiority

The discussion above draws the analysis to a more abstract scale regarding the underlying assumptions of voluntourism; what qualifies the volunteers in the first place if they neither demonstrate knowledge of the local language nor relevant education or experience? This question can be explained through Quijano's (2000) coloniality of power. Quijano (2000) argues that knowledge is never objective because it is entrenched with *western* values and belief systems which uphold the supremacy of the *global north*. *Western* volunteers tend to be overvalued because they are bearers of *white* and *western* knowledge, which is latently regarded as the only and indisputable truth in common global discourse. This could lead to volunteers being placed above the local employees because they are assumed to carry more of this knowledge. Again, an orientalist line of distinction is drawn between the volunteers (supported by a *western* development agency) and the locals, regarding the latter as the 'other' with less agency and understanding of *western* knowledge (Said, 1978). The volunteer represents expertise, while the 'other' is in need of knowledge (Kothari, 2006). *Race* plays an important role in this matter, as the construct is used to equate *whiteness* with *westernness* and, therefore, superiority. This suggests that the predominately *white* volunteers are taken more seriously and therefore are overestimated by, for instance, development agencies such as the BMZ as well as local NGOs (Kothari, 2006). While they are often younger or less competent than local workers, what qualifies them to travel to the *Global South* to 'help out' and volunteer is then primarily their *white-* and *westernness*. This reinforces that *whiteness* equates to privilege and diminishes Black, Indigenous and People of

Colour (BIPoCs)¹⁰ to be worth less than their *white counterparts*. Multiple volunteers reflected on this aspect of racism:

I often had to hear that as a white person, I certainly wouldn't want to share a cab with black people. It was incredibly sobering for me to be confronted again and again with this reality of life. For most Cameroonians, I was worth more than they were. In such situations, I felt infinitely guilty and became aware of my responsibility. No one in the world should be convinced to be inferior (Ronja).

Most people there associate - unfortunately not entirely unjustifiably - white skin with a lot of money. This often led to stressful and annoying situations, and sometimes I felt like a walking bundle of money. However, to judge this would be out of line since this image was created by us whites in the first place (Isabelle).

[The local engineer] was very grateful that we three young people from the so-called "first world" came to the oh-so-small Paraguay. And in such situations, I ask, shouldn't we know better than to distinguish between "better" and "worse" based on different economic situations? (Paul)

These excerpts show how being *white* and *western* is often put on a pedestal, leading to unjust representations and relationships. The volunteers present an understanding of the differentiation made and acknowledge the connotations of their role and responsibility. Nevertheless, the focus lies on the assumed *western* superiority from the perspective of the people at place. This implies that the volunteers position themselves above prejudice as open-minded people, neglecting that they, too, may reproduce aspects of institutionalised racism they were socialised with. If an unequal system functions to one's benefit is often invisible to the observer (Gümüşay, 2021, p. 23). Being treated differently, the volunteers, perhaps for the first time, were able to feel the presence of racism, even though it still acted in their favour (it is out of discussion that *white* people could ever be the target of racism). Some volunteers thus concluded that racism is much more present in their hosting countries than in Germany. To judge this is impossible from a *white* standpoint. It furthermore suggests *western* superiority yet again because it assumes that people in Europe are more aware of racism than elsewhere in the world. This is rather hypocritical, as racism is a

¹⁰ Black, Indigenous and People of Color are political self-designations of people who have experienced multiple forms racism and from whose struggles of resistance have emerged. To highlight this character of resistance these designations are capitalized.

practice of oppression that was developed and is exercised by white people (Werther and Schudy, 2021).

It is difficult to generalise the volunteers' perception of racism from their testimonials. Isabelle, for example, displays an understanding of the colonial history and power that created this perception of alleged superiority. Voluntourism can therefore offer the opportunities to comprehend the persistence of inequalities that colonialism created. Nonetheless, other volunteers only reinforce this colonial understanding by assuming that it is their responsibility to teach the locals about *race* and thereby break down the prejudices connected to racism. Inscribing their own *western* values onto people in the *Global South* and presenting them as unknowledgeable are rather colonial and racist discourses. Very seldom does the questioning of difference or colonial influences in the testimonials regard the volunteers' own qualifications. This perpetuates the underlying problem of colonial assumptions of *western* superiority, legitimising the flow of unqualified *western* volunteers to the *Global South*.

The extent to which the encounters achieved through *Weltwärts* are genuinely equitable is questionable. It appears that the volunteers tend not to contribute a lot, often presenting extra work for the local organisations. This could partly combat the assumption that volunteers will be valuable due to their *white-* and *westernness*, but at what cost? The voluntourism experience then takes the shape of solely being about cultural exchange and equal learning. And surely, the analysis showed that interactions between the locals and the volunteers create possibilities to interchange different perspectives. However, the understandings generated through these interactions are often dominated by a *white* and Eurocentric perspective, which implies that many perceived problems concern merely the 'others' and not the self. Taking the example of racism, many volunteers have come to realise the continuous presence of racism. This realisation, however, regards mostly *the Global South*, leading to many volunteers subconsciously positioning themselves as superior in knowledge about values such as equality. It comes to represent the volunteer as a hero*ine that brings sufficient tools to fix the problems of the *Global South*. Although with good intentions, the volunteers are likely to travel to the *Global South*, gain new experiences, and leave without giving much in exchange apart from the alleged values they impose on the 'other'. While it seems on the

surface that Weltwärts can create mutual encounters through cultural exchange, underlyingly, it still carries colonial tendencies that reinforce the Eurocentric perspective on the *Global South*.

6. Conclusion

This research has aimed to explore the colonial and racist tendencies of voluntourism by investigating the case of Weltwärts. Postcolonial analysis, including specifically the concepts of the Coloniality of Power, Orientalism, Othering and White Saviourism, have been adopted to examine 16 testimonials of Weltwärts volunteers. Consistent with Kontzi (2015), this paper has demonstrated that the assumption of *western* superiority frequently guides the volunteers' thoughts and actions.

Although striving to create equitable encounters and cross-cultural relationships, Weltwärts volunteers often position themselves as superior to the people they are engaging in. This hierarchy does not arise intentionally but relates to the latent orientalist assumptions navigating the volunteers' behaviour (Said, 1978). Here the binary logic of 'othering' is applied in which Germany and the *global north* tend to be depicted as the norm and role model for modernity and rationality. In contrast, the *Global South* represents chaos and 'underdevelopment'. This perpetuates colonial and racist discourses because it reduces the *Global South* to its deficits and weaknesses (Hall, 1980). Thus, portraying the *Global South* as a difficult and exciting adventure, many volunteers fall into the *white* saviour narrative. This portrays the volunteers as hero*ines that overcome discomfort to rescue people from the burdens of poverty (Bandyopadhyay, 2019). However, the volunteers' testimonials demonstrate that they are not at all qualified for the tasks present in volunteering projects. Most do not know the local languages, nor do they have education or experience relevant for their volunteer work. The analysis showses that volunteers' qualifications to 'help out', therefore, rely mainly on their character representing *western* knowledge and *whiteness*. Drawing on the assumption of *western* and *white* superiority, this reinforces the oppression and discrimination of people from and places in the *Global South*.

These findings question the extent to which voluntourism can break down cultural imperialism and facilitate equal Global Learning (as discussed by Wearing and Pointing, 2009). Even though Weltwärts actively tries to distance itself from colonial tendencies, it still cannot shake their

influence. The colonial continuity within voluntourism illustrates that the practice cannot be free of inequalities. – despite the very changes made by Weltwärts to address a postcolonial critique already posed in 2017, inequalities do persist to this day. This furthermore emphasises the importance of regarding *race* in this matter. Equalising *whiteness* with knowledge and qualification, voluntourism specifically, and development, more generally, are deeply influenced by institutional racism and the exercise of hegemonic power relations (Kothari, 2006). This closely relates to development being entrenched by a history of colonial exploitation. Its everlasting effects stabilise a biased perception of reality navigated by the Eurocentric perspective of *western* superiority, positioning the *west* above the ‘rest’.

Not accurately addressing this issue leads to volunteers not questioning their power and privilege and consequently reinforcing the alleged superiority of the *global north*. This study shows that preparatory seminars, as well as voluntourism projects themselves, are not fully able to overcome these barriers of colonial power and racism. Rather, it takes a constant practice of undoing and unlearning old patterns of thought. “Decolonising refers to the process of dismantling these colonial legacies” (Werther and Schudy, 2021, p. 5). Research and practices concerning development should therefore consider its colonial legacy. This includes, furthermore, the need for researchers and development practitioners to confront the limitations and subjectivity of their perspective and change contemporary discourse by highlighting marginalised voices (Gümüşay, 2021, p. 138). To do so, future research should focus on the perspective of the *Global South* when investigating topics of development, including voluntourism. This comprises not merely the viewpoints and data to be examined but the very questions asked and the knowledge systems employed for the analysis. Only then could there be a possibility for the contemporary narrative to paint a more accurate picture of reality, including a “more realistic understanding of development [that] put[s] all forms and colours of knowledge at the centre” (Syed and Ali, 2011, p. 362; Spivak, 1988).

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8. Appendix:

Testimonials Used in the Content Analysis

Amina. “Amina Worked in a Hospital.” *AFS - Testimonials/Voluntary Service* , 22 Dec. 2019, www.afs.de/erfahrungsbericht/freiwilligendienst/amina-hat-in-einem-krankenhaus-gearbeitet/. Accessed 6 May 2023.

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LUMID ETHICAL REVIEW- SELF EVALUATION¹¹

First-Stage Ethical Review

The Lund University Masters in International Development (LUMID) recognizes *self-evaluation* as the general principle guiding the enactment of an ethically-aware research among its staff and students. To this scope, the following document lists a set of questions to be taken into consideration prior to the design of all research projects. All researchers at the department are encouraged to complete this form; however this rests in no ways prescriptive or associated to any form of ethical clearance or approval.

Should your answers point at some specific ethical issues with regards to your research, you're welcome to contact the LUMID Ethics Advisory Board through the LUMID Director of Studies.

TITLE OF RESEARCH: **Colonial Tendencies of Voluntourism:** A Postcolonial Analysis of Weltwärts Testimonials

NAME(S): Amelie Mara Aue

Please answer each question YES or NO by ticking the boxes in the Checklist below.

	YES	NO
1. Will the project involve gathering personal information on identifiable living individuals that will remain in non-anonymized form?		X
2. Does the research involve vulnerable groups, which would include such people as: children, those with cognitive impairment, refugees, undocumented migrants, asylum seekers, prisoners or victims of violence?		X
3. Will the project require the co-operation of a gatekeeper (i.e. an authority figure who has the power to grant access to individuals and information possibly without their knowledge or informed consent) for initial access to the groups or individuals to be recruited?		X
4. Will it be necessary for participants to take part in the study without their knowledge and consent at the time? (e.g. through covert observation or recording)		X
5. Will the research involve topics that may be deemed to be politically, socially, or culturally sensitive?		X
6. Will the research use data that requires permission from the appropriate authorities or owners before use?		X
7. Will financial inducements or gifts (other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time) be offered to participants?		X
8. Will the research involve gathering and/or sharing data or confidential information beyond the initial consent given?		X

¹¹ Please notice that this draft checklist is a combination of similar questionnaires adopted at SOAS and Edinburgh University and adapted from the questionnaire at the Department of Political Science, Lund University.

9. Will the research involve means that potentially make respondents identifiable <i>who have requested, or might reasonably anticipate, anonymity</i> ? Such means might include, as examples, ISP addresses, video or voice recordings, visual images, or specification of personal characteristics likely to identify an unnamed individual.		x
10. Does the research entail potential security risks to research subjects (e.g. police interrogation, kidnapping, illness) that exceed those experienced in their everyday lives?		x
11. Does the research involve any physically invasive or potentially physically harmful procedures?		x
12. Will the research take place in a location or manner that could expose the researcher or research assistants to risks that exceed those experienced in their everyday lives?		x
13. Could the research induce any psychological stress or discomfort?		x
14. To the best of your knowledge, will the research raise any other issues which should be the subject of ethical consideration and/or review?		x

- If you have responded ‘**no**’ to all of these questions, then your research project entails minimal risk.
- If you have responded ‘**yes**’ to any other questions, your research project entails more than a minimal risk and you are encouraged to contact the LUMID Ethics Advisory Board through the LUMID Director of Studies.