

Voluntourism, Ineffective International Development, and Global Youth Engagement

Carly Michelle Pullin

Volunteer travel is one of the fastest growing sectors of the travel industry. Every year, millions of young people go overseas to work on international projects in developing countries.¹ Volunteer tourism, commonly referred to as ‘voluntourism,’ is a burgeoning method of international development that seeks to positively affect the “social, cultural, natural or economic situations of places visited, while gaining breadth and depth to one’s personal perspective, in addition to travelling and enjoying ‘traditional elements of travel’ during personal leisure time.”² My experience on a Me to We voluntourism trip to Ghana in high school was the catalyst that first sparked my interest in international relations. However, there are aspects of voluntourism that ought to be scrutinised. Through analyses of voluntourism organisations and their repercussions on participants and host communities, I examine the following questions: is ethical voluntourism achievable? Can voluntourism stimulate durable development or are its positive impacts outweighed by its negative ramifications?

In the global governance landscape, international partnerships are mobilising across borders in the pursuit of common goals. Partnerships are formed between NGOs, local communities, and governments to promote international development. Voluntourism has arisen out of globalisation and commercialisation, and generally includes projects focused on the provision of education, health care, environmental protection, and infrastructure.³ NGOs design and carry out development projects that aim to increase empowerment in host communities, as well as establish more inclusive institutions of global governance.⁴ However,

the well-intentioned endeavours in which volunteers partake occasionally cause more harm than good.

Orphanage tourism, for instance, is one of the most common and popular forms of volunteer travel.⁵ Although the global number of orphans is falling, the number of commercial orphanages is rising in response to the recent surge in demand for voluntourism.⁶ Shockingly, the majority of children in these facilities have at least one living parent. Parents and guardians who cannot afford to provide for their children may volunteer or be forced to give up their children to institutional care. Thus, orphanage tourism keeps commercial orphanages in business and reduces “the impetus to reunify children with families, promote sustainable alternative care, and facilitate access to proper education.”⁷ Rather than benefiting marginalised children, this system fuels the separation of families. Furthermore, orphanages can be harmful for legitimate orphans. The UN affirms that orphanages should be short-term solutions and not development projects, as they are less secure for children in comparison to alternative custody approaches, such as community-based care or foster solutions. Many industry NGOs agree and strongly advise unqualified volunteers to avoid working with vulnerable children.⁸

Another common purpose of voluntourism is the construction of elementary provisions, such as houses or schools. Although it may stem from philanthropic impulses, the process is slow and often ineffective. Me to We, a prominent Canadian international development organisation that provides voluntours for students, is notorious for creating programs in which “inexperienced Western workers perform menial labour while being directed by local workers.”⁹ One participant spoke about her experience of building a library in Tanzania, in which the work done during the day by teenage volunteers was so poor that locals fixed the construction by night.¹⁰ Locally sourced labour is less time intensive and more effective. Additionally, hiring qualified local labourers would further stimulate community development.¹¹ Using existing sources is often a priority of economic policy in developing states. External assistance is much more effective when it provides resources that are otherwise lacking.¹² Ultimately, voluntourists pay to *feel* as though they are helping and hence do not generally worry about the final result.¹³ During my week in the village of Asemkow in southern Ghana, we worked on the construction of a school for only a few days and a few hours at a time.

No one in the group had any construction experience, and most had never held a job before. The local workers had to spend time and effort supervising our performance and instructing us on how to accomplish a variety of tasks. We worked hard, but we often got in their way. In the end, we contributed to the foundation of the school, but we did not witness its completion. Apart from the efficiency and adequacy of the infrastructure work itself, erecting a building does not guarantee the productive use of that building; constructing schools does not necessarily result in “higher literacy, post-graduation employment rates or even increased education.”¹⁴ Voluntourism acts more as a mechanism for off-setting Western guilt than as a means of international development.

Voluntourism trips are often critiqued for their role in fostering a superiority complex among Western participants. The imbalance of power between the volunteers and the people in host communities receiving aid may create a perceived social distance, further bolstering the ideological separation of the Global North and Global South. The most cynical critics of voluntourism believe that “our ‘one-upping’ culture enjoys this type of travel because it transfers our society’s superiority status onto the individual traveller in this context” and responds to the participant’s paternalistic desire for heroic status.¹⁵ The fact that young people prefer volunteer opportunities involving children in foreign countries to those in their own communities implies that the perceived helplessness of foreigners is enticing to Westerners, perhaps because it elicits feelings of power. Even if the ‘white saviour’ complex of the trip is never overtly voiced by any particular voluntourism organisation—and is at times explicitly denied—it is likely internalised by many participants. For instance, I returned from Ghana with a specific desire to help people abroad, but I was not encouraged to examine issues within my own community. I gave multiple presentations upon my return. I talked with other students about the things we take for granted in Canada and how the Ghanaians were happy despite their living situation. I now realise that I was unwittingly driving the exoticisation and ‘othering’ of foreigners by contributing to a rhetoric of pity and cultural imperialism. Voluntourism perpetuates neo-colonialist narratives. It imposes Western values and structures onto other civilisations by inadvertently instilling components of neoliberalism in its host communities.¹⁶ To appeal to high school students, *Me to We* portrays the Global South as requiring the help that can be provided through

a voluntourism trip.¹⁷ This discourse thrives off colonial myths by subverting the autonomy of developing states. By presenting a picture of weak, destitute communities in need of rich state rescuers, attention is diverted away from local developmental problems. For example, the Me to We website advertises that an Amazon trip will involve learning about the obstacles confronted by rural Indigenous communities, such as limited economic independence and unequal access to necessities like potable water.¹⁸ There is no mention of the litany of similar issues facing Indigenous peoples in Canada, reflecting the common, ethnocentric belief that Canada provides for all of its citizens equally.

In the host communities themselves, voluntourism does not promote continuous development. To produce and maintain meaningful benefits, development initiatives must be “indigenous, self-generating, and in harmony with local conditions and circumstances.”¹⁹ However, corporate tours are private sector global governance actors and are thus profit driven. Although allegedly altruistic, voluntours are quite profitable; the global economic impact of private voluntourism is approximately three billion US dollars.²⁰ This financial pull has resulted in large commercial tour operators incorporating charitable activities as a marketing strategy to target a growing conscientious consumer base.²¹ Short voluntourism experiences, though seemingly a “happy medium between responsibility, convenience, affordability and opportunity, [...] also harbour the dangers of exploitation and compromising of values and ethics.”²² Capital-oriented firms prioritise the desires of paying customers over those of the host communities and thus tend to align development projects with the values of external stakeholders rather than local participatory approaches.²³ The priorities and indicators of successful development used by voluntourism providers then conflict with those of the community they purport to assist.²⁴ The money spent on voluntourism would be more productively allocated through nonprofit donations wherein one hundred percent of proceeds are allotted to viable development initiatives. Alternatively, one could invest money into developing a skillset to effectively contribute to such endeavours in the future. Meanwhile, organisations appeal to consumers with promises of personal growth, work experience, cultural capital, deep friendships, adventures, and self-reflection, thereby restricting the types of projects they can pursue.²⁵ For instance, Me to We publicises its trips with pictures of young, white blondes playing with smiling children of colour

against tropical backdrops. These images of appropriation disguised as multiculturalism and selfless service align with the Western mindset of foreign aid and are eagerly accepted by the public.

Corporate tours are not alone in their detrimental nature; programs run by nonprofit organisations also have downsides. Communities may become dependent on organisations supplying volunteers—and on the speed and quality of their labour—rather than carrying out developmental projects independently. Most of these organisations focus on service delivery and therefore do little, if anything, to target the root problems of underdevelopment, including political, economic, and social factors. These temporary solutions for complex problems are used at the expense of long-term development results and are consequently unsustainable. Furthermore, the young and inexperienced volunteers that undertake these trips usually lack an understanding of these root problems. The reductionist strategies of organisations depict development work as easy, despite its complicated and multifaceted nature. In reality, it requires “adequate preparation and investigation of projects, precise information on requirements and co-ordinated execution.”²⁶ Effective international participation can only be achieved if partnered with in-depth civic knowledge, including a holistic comprehension of governmental structures, geography, and socioeconomic dynamics.²⁷ Unfortunately, contemporary global governance favours piecemeal responses to international issues that are inefficient, neoliberal, and insensitive to the concerns of labour and the rural poor.²⁸ Such responses neglect a community’s right to self-determination. Adequate development has to originate from the ground up rather than be imported or imposed from the top down.²⁹ Durable development requires time and patience coupled with expertise.

Despite the clear and alarming complications that accompany voluntourism, it would be ignorant to callously label its processes as insignificant. It is worth considering the direct and indirect ways voluntourism positively affects host communities and volunteers. The benefits may include the development of social bonds between volunteers and community members, eschewed stereotypes and generalisations, diverse and shared knowledge, and the promotion of cross-cultural understanding. In addition, voluntourism plays an important role in promoting the academic, personal, and civic development of adolescents.³⁰ At a time when youth community involvement rates are historically low compared

to those of adults, international volunteering is a powerful mechanism to strengthen youth reflection on the moral and ethical factors tied up in the global polity.³¹ Many voluntourism participants report an altered outlook on and appreciation of their lives, as well as a solidification of their enthusiasm for volunteerism.³² Other common outcomes include improved academic participation and performance, elevated social competence and behaviour, political awareness and progressive attitudes, and an increased drive toward social action.³³ Voluntourism programs, though partially misguided, may play a part in creating future generations of open-minded and globally conscientious activists. From my own experience, I was able to witness a different community and culture firsthand, driving away many of my reductive preconceptions. Furthermore, I participated in inspiring leadership activities and group discussions about transnational issues to which I had not previously been exposed, such as contemporary slavery and corporate-fueled water insecurity. My trip significantly challenged my ways of thinking about the world. Since my return, I have volunteered more, paid more attention to international affairs, altered my consumption habits, and found a newfound desire to study international relations.

The wide appeal and productive potential of voluntourism implies that global governance actors have a stake in combining youth engagement with effective and ethical international development. Creating educational experiences is of the utmost importance when developing globally competent citizens. It is important to imagine alternative ways in which youth around the world can become involved in and inspired by international and local development and matters of social justice, as well as ways in which organisations can help properly prepare youth for the responsibilities that accompany global citizenship. Critical reflection on the matter must seek an appropriate equilibrium between self-enhancement for participants and the provision of true benefits for the visited community.³⁴ Noncorporate responsible tourism initiatives that follow a learning-service approach, rather than one of service-learning, are an example of an innovation designed to counter the threat of intrusion. Development education tours, such as those offered by PEPY Tours, promote empathy learning over sympathy volunteering in an effort to encourage humble listening and education before engaging in future service.³⁵ Learning by doing, though perhaps beneficial for the volunteer, is undertaken at the expense of the host

community. In contrast, learning first allows participants to become more informed volunteers, donors, and workers in the future. It also allows for the development of a deep respect for the culture of the region they are visiting.³⁶ Volunteers can acquire the theoretical and practical tools needed to understand the complexities of development work while still fostering interest and inspiration. PEPY Tours' international development education tours involve question sessions with development professionals, debates, discussions, and an exchange of ideas with local youth.³⁷ They allow participants to acquire important civic knowledge, understand discrimination and other disadvantages in the context of the particular community, and learn how to collaborate with others in order to address these issues.³⁸ PEPY Tours channels the funds gained from the programs into its sister NGO and other local associations. These funds are unrestricted so that grassroot organisations can effectively utilise the money to respond to diverse community needs.³⁹

Additionally, parents and schools have a part to play in the encouragement of adolescent engagement in both international and local communities. Rob Oliver and Michelle Oliel, nonprofit foundation workers, state that "volunteering should not be seen as another form of tourism, but as a commitment in itself."⁴⁰ Before volunteering abroad, youth could enter the field of development work by beginning with projects in their own communities or by working with established groups that provide valuable mentorship, support, and training. A study comparing the effects of volunteering on international and local volunteers showed that both groups experienced increased personal development, but those who participated in a local community service project changed significantly more over the course of the study in self-efficacy, civic action, and intercultural awareness.⁴¹

Considering the opaque line between helping and hurting a developing community or state, global governance actors must tread with caution when attempting to combine youth tourism with international development. Evidence suggests that voluntourism "externalizes the development process, empowers paying volunteers as saviours with their Western knowledge and education, and functions more as a volunteer traveler's quest for career development than as a development tool."⁴² Volunteering abroad often leads to positive social outcomes as well, but the relationship between the volunteers and the host community is not reciprocal if they are not accompanied by lasting, material

improvements. Effort must be put into creating diligent programs and structures that merge feasible, advantageous development with work to subvert the ever-present colonial narrative, rather than contribute to it. Societies in the Global North should encourage critical thinking in children and expand their sense of personal accountability, including the acknowledgement and confrontation of one's own privilege. If international service-learning programs could be developed to reflect these considerations, voluntourism could be an admirable force for positive and sustainable international development as well as global youth engagement.

NOTES

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21. Foller-Carrol and Charlebois, 140.
22. Foller-Carrol and Charlebois, 153.
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