

# Helping or Hurting: How to Put the “Volunteer” in Voluntourism

The world’s largest travel leisure company, Carnival Cruise lines, recently introduced a new ship centered upon the idea of “social impact.” This ship, entitled the “Fathom,” goes on a seven day trip that leaves from Miami and docks in the Dominican Republic. On this trip, passengers partake in activities such as teaching English to educators, cultivating cocoa plants, and making chocolate with women’s cooperatives. While those that partake in this cruise believe they are contributing to the development of the third world country that they are visiting, others harvest the opposite belief. Therefore, this voyage raises the question: Are the volunteers doing this primarily for the goodness of the impoverished or for self-enjoyment? Although the passengers perceive they are doing good, some might consider what they are doing to be “voluntourism.”



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Voluntourism refers to the idea that people take trips to exotic destinations in hopes of completing service work to better the community. However, in many cases of this process, these people end up only minorly helping the community, and in some cases, hurting the communities they are visiting. As a result, these volunteers end up acting more like tourists and less like volunteers, thus the birth of the term “voluntourism.”

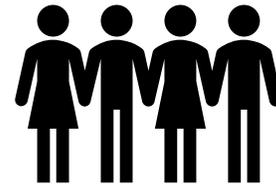
With this concept comes a plethora of varying viewpoints, many of them extreme. *Thrive Global* notes that voluntourism is a \$173 billion dollar industry. Volunteers spend monstrous amounts of money on airfare, cash donations, tangible donations, and volunteering fees to name just a few in order to merely reach their location of interest. Additionally, having a steady flow of volunteers often takes away jobs from locals, contributing to the steep increase in poverty rates.

A recent story about a trip to Africa encompasses many of the issues people have with voluntourism. Noelle Sullivan, Associate Professor of Instruction in Global Health Studies at Northwestern University, recently visited Northern Tanzania on a mission trip. Upon her arrival at a local government-owned hospital, she witnessed a British high school student “wielding a saw at a patient’s side” in an attempt to amputate the leg of a motorcycle crash victim. The student had no medical training. Although this case is extreme, this is the exact point naysayers to voluntourism often make: volunteering in places without proper resources and knowledge can often lead to disastrous, even fatal, consequences.

On the other hand, voluntourism can offer many pros. It is proven that volunteering causes a decrease in depression among volunteers and those that volunteers provide help to. A recent study at Carnegie Mellon University notes that participating in two hundred hours of volunteering every year correlates with lower blood pressure. Also, volunteering often leaves people feeling a sense of satisfaction that they have left a positive impact on somebody's life, regardless if that is the reality or not. Additionally, volunteering in foreign countries helps people gain cultural exposure. By gaining knowledge of how the different portions of the rest of the world work, volunteers are able to gain a new appreciation for different ways of life.

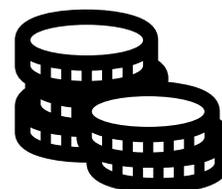
*Our goal by the end of this deliberation is to develop a course of action for to how make a mission that was initially rooted in charity and kindheartedness, better than it currently is. Throughout this event, we will be diving into three approaches that have been meticulously researched and discuss the efficacy of each of them.*

Our first approach focuses on cultural sensitivity and acceptance. Visitors to a foreign country should be well-educated about the region’s culture and history. Since short-term trips are limited in their ability to make lasting change, we should focus on cultural immersion and sustainable tourism methods so that future volunteers with more time and resources can collaborate *with* the citizens rather than forcing unobtainable Western ideas on them.



The second approach is centered around providing the native people with sustainable solutions to their issues. This would require start-off materials and education for citizens so that they can continue to reap the benefits of the implemented systems without the presence of westerners. By bringing in first-world ideas that comply with the cultural norms and practices of the community in need, countries are able to thrive without recurring external aid.

Our last approach looks at the more indirect side of voluntourism. Instead of disturbing the foreign countries by physically going to that specific country, we can focus on improving the fundraising aspect from back home. Holding volunteer-based organizations accountable for their actions is the first main step. Creating a more transparent system to see exactly where donations are being spent prevents corruption and provides financial assistance to impoverished countries.



# Approach 1: Cultural Sensitivity



Given the busy-ness of our lives, it can be difficult to set aside several months to study or volunteer abroad, so most travelers tend to only stay in a foreign country for a week or two, which can make impactful volunteer work very difficult to accomplish given the reduced timeframe. Traveling is an essential piece of expanding one's worldview, so these short trips can still be beneficial to both the tourist and the host country as long as careful actions are taken to increase cultural competence and practice sustainable tourism methods.

Many travelers, especially voluntourists, go into the experience hoping to gain greater cultural knowledge, but this is much easier said than done. Typically, when volunteers work with impoverished people, they tend to develop one of two views: the poor are simply victims of “bad luck” while Westerners were blessed with “good luck,” or the poor are lucky to be happy with so little and escape the evils of materialism that accompany wealth (Freidus). Both of these mindsets overlook the myriad of nuanced reasons for poverty that are often systemic and result from structural failures, such as the scramble for African colonies and the post-independence struggle to establish effective governments (Addae-Korankye).

## Before the Trip

Luckily, we can take several steps to minimize the aforementioned harmful and insensitive views, such as developing cultural competence before the experience abroad. A study done in Denmark found that international tourists gained the most from their experiences abroad if the travel program addressed the three key concepts of attitude, knowledge, and skill before the trip (Karlsen). “Attitude” refers to maintaining a respectful outlook and realizing the limits of the volunteer work that can be done; this can prevent the development of white savior complexes, which occur when white visitors develop feelings of superiority in the developing countries that they have come to “save” despite a lack of understanding of the culture or history of the region. “Knowledge” addresses cultural, historical, and political information that every traveler should possess about the region they are visiting. “Skill development” aims at preparation not only for the work being done but also for cultural navigation (Karlsen). Active learning measures like journaling, group discussions, guest lecturers, and debates prove to be the most effective at addressing these concepts and could be used to develop culturally immersive volunteers (Smith). In addition, there are steps volunteers can take while traveling to ensure they have a positive impact even during a short trip to a foreign country, namely through sustainable tourism methods. In short, there are three main tenets of sustainable tourism: using environmentally friendly practices, conserving cultural and natural heritage, and making positive social and economic impacts on local communities (Christ).

### During the Trip

Tourists can minimize their environmental impact by choosing travel and boarding accommodations carefully. Trains and cars, for instance, have a smaller carbon footprint than airplanes, and using public transportation when available will minimize pollution (Christ). It is also important to research whether a lodging provider uses sustainable methods like recycling and composting (“Sustaining Tourism’s Guide to Being a Responsible Traveller”). As always, taking measures to reduce waste, like using less plastic and conserving energy, are important and should be done in any country.

Conserving the cultural and natural heritage of a country centers around respect for the people and animals in the region being visited. It is easy to adhere to simple actions like following dress norms, attending cultural events, and eating sustainable food that does not encourage the trafficking of endangered species, and these measures help protect the identity of that country (“Sustaining Tourism’s Guide to Being a Responsible Traveller”). Respect for the culture is extremely important; taking pictures without permission and giving out items, which promotes begging, can do more harm than good and should be avoided (Houghton).

The action with the largest impact, however, is supporting the local community; after all, tourism makes up 10.2% of the global GDP and employs millions across the world (“5 Ways Tourism Can Support Local Economies”). However, there is a major issue with “tourism leakage,” in which large corporations rob the benefits of tourism from the local towns. Up to 80% of local profits can be lost this way (“5 Ways Tourism Can Support Local Economies”).

Thus, supporting local businesses and organizations while abroad is one of the most important ways a traveler can have a positive impact in a short amount of time. Taking walking tours, eating at family-owned restaurants, and buying local souvenirs can all give a tourist a better idea of the culture while keeping the money within the local community (Christ).

## ADVANTAGES

- Costs less than long-term trips
- Less time commitment so students can fit a global experience into a busy schedule
- Tourists become more culturally sensitive and informed
- More meaningful experience (interacting with locals, self-reflection, and creating relationships abroad)
- Local communities will see greater economic benefits from tourism
- Local ecosystems and cultures will be better preserved and not ruined by insensitive tourists

## DRAWBACKS

- Effects might not have meaningful long-term impacts
- Takes a lot more work to do the necessary research and have a meaningful experience
- Hard to enforce and to decide who is responsible for educating tourists
- More time-consuming pre-trip
- Might be more expensive than using larger, less local/community-based companies, so fewer tourists would want to invest

### Doing the Research

Extensive research is needed to ensure that sustainable tourism methods are being upheld, especially when traveling with a large company. Some web services, like *Kind Travel*, which provides discounted hotel rooms when tourists make a donation to local charities, benefit both the traveler and host country (Glusac). In contrast, other services like Airbnb's local tour offerings might seem like they are helpful, but in reality, 20% of the profits are going back to Airbnb instead of to the community ("Sustaining Tourism's Guide to Being a Responsible Traveller").

For shorter trips abroad, being well-educated by doing research is key to being a beneficial tourist. Before the trip, self-reflection and cultural studies help stop toxic mindsets from forming, and during the trip, sustainable tourism practices keep local communities thriving. However, it takes a lot of time and effort to conduct the necessary research to be a "good tourist," so many people might question who should take the burden of these responsibilities. Requiring schools and universities to provide informational sessions to students traveling overseas might improve cultural sensitivity and global understanding, but could also drive up the cost and decrease the number of participants. Relying on individual programs to educate volunteers before trips is another possible solution, but this would again be more cumbersome and hard to enforce. Finally, individual traveling could be encouraged to pay more attention to sustainable tourism through awareness campaigns, but accountability would be an issue. However, the biggest thing to keep in mind is that this approach only offers solution for short term effects, so any benefits will not necessarily carry over long term.

## Approach 2: Permanent Projects

### The Problem with "Volunteering"

The word volunteering traditionally conjures up images of a good-willed individual freely choosing to help someone else. This is often case but, sadly, volunteering can sometimes be twisted into an act that benefits the one performing the deed more so than the individual who needs help. When volunteering abroad, particularly, the "giving back" aspect often takes the form of traveling and implementing a temporary fix for a problem that requires long-term attention. These unfortunate situations can arise both from personal image-oriented and good-intentioned mindsets on the part of the volunteer. They may firmly believe their assistance will make a positive impact, but in reality they lack the education or information required to fully understand the needs of these communities.

An example of this lack of education comes from Natalie Jesionka, a writer who volunteered in Burma, a Southeast Asian nation. There, Jesionka learned of a little boy who would lose his hearing if he did not undergo surgery, and she believed the boy could regain his hearing if he simply had the money needed to receive the operation. She soon learned, however, after raising the money, that it was virtually impossible for the boy to get surgery; his hearing issues were



real, lasting solutions take time to implement (Jesionka).

“inevitable” and he was a refugee, so he would most likely be denied help at developed hospitals capable of performing the operation. Thus, Natalie was forced to tell the boy that the help he was promised could not be given to him. The missing piece in this situation was information. The volunteer had the resources but lacked an understanding of the boy’s culture and the reality that

Although benefits in short-term volunteer programs, like building a house or providing school supplies, exist, the aid given by the volunteers in these programs contributes a negligible amount to the overarching, lasting solutions they are convinced they are implementing. This naivety lays claim to many unskilled volunteers that believe their good intentions counteract their lack of ability to properly complete these projects. How will a difference be made when teenagers are sent to mix cement and dig into the hard, clay grounds of countries they know nothing about? Additionally, building a school and ensuring the locals use the building for its intended purpose vary greatly in their long term effects. While the volunteers return home feeling accomplished, the locals from that community could still be scrambling to find ways to hire and compensate a staff of educators with non-existent funds (Kushner).

#### How Do We Prevent This?

In order to put the volunteer back in voluntourism, systems must be administered in foreign countries that have proof of sustainability. This administration, along with teaching the natives how to operate these systems autonomously, will ensure the community can run efficiently without depending on the resources and presence of volunteer groups. A focus on teaching in these foreign countries, rather than simply handing them the solution, is vital to dissociate volunteers from the current mindset associated with voluntourism.

A prime example of this concept is seen among Global Brigades, an international non-profit focused on reducing inequality through a variety of brigades including medical, dental, engineering, public health, and more. Within the Public Health Brigade, the designated group works alongside community members to improve health conditions for the society as a whole. In one effort, volunteers helped build latrines in order to provide running water in homes throughout Honduras. In doing so, they educated the Honduran families on how to properly build, fix, and use their latrine, thereby making a longer lasting impact. This group also worked to install eco stoves in Honduran households, educating them on the importance and benefit of such an appliance. The Hondurans now know that inhaling smoke released by their outdated ovens is unhealthy and leads to respiratory illnesses. With the help of the Public Health Brigade, the natives better understand the underlying causes of these medical issues, as well as how to



prevent them from occurring in the future by properly utilizing the eco-stove. By implementing a solution with an appropriate knowledge of the community, the determined, mindful volunteers of the Public Health Brigade made a sustainable, lasting difference (“Home”).

### Sustainability on a Global Scale

Because of Global Brigades, the Honduran community no longer requires outside influence to solve their issues, and multiple organizations are taking a similar approach to generate similar outcomes. These organizations comply to the seventeen sustainable development goals set by the United Nations, including the construction of sustainable communities and partnership in global efforts. Since its initial implementation in January 2016, the plan has helped guide volunteer groups on what major issues need aid in foreign areas (“Volunteerism”). The plan benefits not only the communities in need but society as a whole, as it allows people to educate themselves on global issues and collaborate on long-term solutions with one another. The emphasis on collective effort ensures the communities in need can develop independently, after volunteers leave, so that they can learn how to fix, and continue to fix, issues on their own (Cobb).

Other benefits of the sustainability plan appear when comparing the environmental friendliness of systems currently being taught to natives to those the community may have already been practicing. For example, organizations such as the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), work to provide agricultural aid and food security to communities around the world. In particular, they help subsistence farmers better manage pastures, water, and livestock, all the while promoting sustainable management of resources. The solutions implemented are tailored to the issues faced in each community, ensuring their success with training and support through education (Agriculture). We continue to see measurable and visible results in communities of need with groups focused on sustainability, encouraging the continuation of their use to solve global challenges.

## ADVANTAGES

- Teaches communities how to properly implement solutions rather than handing solutions to them
- Creates widespread understanding of societal issues with the mindset that communities will use the knowledge to self-develop
- Provides community with basis for future development
- Implements potentially more environmentally friendly and sustainable systems
- Builds awareness in third-world countries of the standards set by first-world nations across the globe

## DRAWBACKS

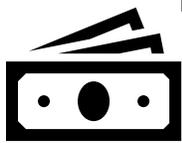
- Gives more direct instruction rather than enabling to learn through experience and self-develop
- Developing areas may not have knowledge to continue integrating solutions, which can lead to dependence
- Lack of cultural influence on implemented systems, which can lead to ineffective, unsustainable aid
- Lack of learning from the experience for the volunteers (act as minimally-educated teachers rather than students to the process)

### Potential Drawbacks

Many drawbacks of bringing sustainable solutions to culturally diverse communities across the globe stem from an initial over-dependence on the volunteers implementing the solutions. In an idealistic world, members of underdeveloped communities would learn through experience in a self-developmental process how to appropriately implement solutions, rather than simply receiving instruction from volunteers. These communities, however, may not have an adequate understanding of such solutions in order to properly self-develop, causing them to relapse into a state of dependence on foreign aid. If dependence continues to persist, the lack of cultural influence on implemented systems would result in the ineffective, unsustainable implementation of supposedly long-term solutions. In addition to potentially reverting to old voluntourism techniques, such an approach removes the ability for volunteers to learn from the experience, as they are placed into teaching roles when implementing the solution. Bringing sustainable solutions to communities so as to limit their dependence on future foreign aid understandably generates much intrigue, but brings with it several potential drawbacks if volunteers are not careful with their solution implementation.

## Approach 3: Helping from a Distance

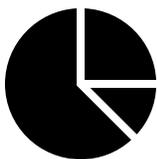
Voluntourism is a billion dollar industry. Many people are seeking out volunteer experiences abroad, and for the majority of these service programs, they will need to pay a sum to participate (Pariyar). The question is, if billions of dollars are funneled into these mission trips each year, how can we be sure that the money is being handled honestly and efficiently?



Non-profit organizations are required by the government to provide certain financial documents to the public upon request, which helps create a sense of transparency for their mission (Purvis). However, few people are willing to pour over all of these reports, and those who do might not be able to understand the information. Also, even though nonprofits are required to have transparent finances, this rule does not necessarily apply to other private organizations. The legal requirement to provide specific financial information also does not cover other internal documents that record an organization's goals.



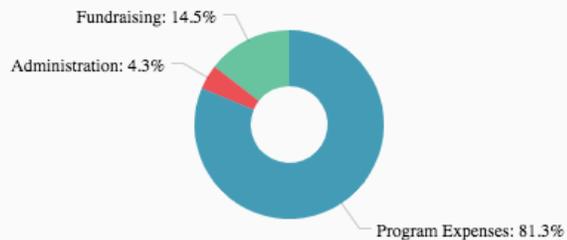
Ideally, all organizations would be subject to some form of regulation, and their business practices would be kept honest. In order to achieve an attainable practice like this, it is suggested that some form of financial accountability is imposed on all volunteering organizations. One way this could be achieved is by setting up a measurable goal or outcome.



If each service trip outlines clear and detailed reports of what they plan to do with their funds, this will not only help streamline the management their own finances, but it will also help keep the public aware of where their donations are going. It would also be effective if after each trip or event, the organization published any additional updates on their spending plans.

### Habitat For Humanity

Total Revenue (2014): 277.2 million  
Total Expenses (2014): 260.6 million



space (Southwick). Habitat for Humanity proactively provides their tax disclosure forms on their website, along with other information about their finances.

An example of service organizations abusing funds is the handling of the Haitian orphan crisis. There are currently 30,000 children in Haitian orphanages, but it is estimated that 80% of those children have at least one living parent (Larsson). A significant number of these orphanages are funded by overseas charities. Since these charities rely on donations from wealthy foreigners, they benefit from a large number of “orphaned” children. Orphanages have been known to pay parents for their children, offering them money and the promise that they would receive a superior education.

Wealthy foreigners will often pay exorbitant amounts of money to visit the orphanages and deliver “supplies”. This has a devastating effect on Haiti’s future, as many of its younger generation are growing up without parents, which is proven to have negative results down the road. Additionally, some of these “orphans” fall victim to human trafficking, as orphanages sell them to the highest bidder. This begs the question: what should be done, if anything?

#### What Volunteers Can Do

There are some resources that citizens can use to make informed decisions before taking part in a service trip. For example, the website Charity Navigator allows people to gain reliable information about their charity of interest, which will help them avoid scams and give them specific details about each organization. In

#### Keeping Organizations Honest

Habitat for Humanity, a well-known nonprofit organization, has previously outlined where their expenses are being allocated. The majority of their funds go towards program costs such as supplies for the project, training for volunteers, and expenses for local events. Only a small percent of their funding goes towards fundraising and administrative costs, which goes towards items such as social media campaigns and the cost of renting office

### ADVANTAGES

- Ensures money given to charities actually helps those it is intended for
- Creates accountability for charities
- Prevents exploitations of native populations
- Allows governments to punish charities that abuse funds
- Outlines specifically where funds are being used for the project

### DRAWBACKS

- No opportunity for volunteers to experience aid first-hand
- Could limit the number of organizations willing to help, resulting in less aid going to impoverished nations
- Resources are used towards creating detailed financial reports instead of towards the program itself
- External companies are used for financial management, which could inadvertently take away from transparency

addition, they provide a helpful guide for volunteering that outlines the responsibilities of each volunteer and all of the money that goes into their training and job. Their guide asks each prospective volunteer to “quantify and qualify what they have to offer” because this reflection will help them determine if they are truly interested in making a financial commitment (*Charity Navigator*).

#### Potential Roadblocks

However, while it is a good idea for potential volunteers and organizations to be thorough with the management of their financial practices, this can take away a lot of time from the service itself. Culminating a report of expenses requires additional resources such as hiring a financial planner and analysts, which might not be very cost-effective for smaller organizations (Scott). Financial accountability should improve volunteering organizations, not hinder them from helping communities in need. Also, detailing every transaction might be difficult for large organizations that have many branches to hold accountable. In addition, while collaborating with other companies might help streamline finances, it can also further cloud the path of donations.

This approach of strengthening financial accountability requirements can benefit volunteers, donors, and organizations, which can further improve the intended goal of the volunteer program. By making sure that organizations provide ample documentation of the money collected from volunteers, donors, grants, or other sources, we can create a transparent and honest environment. However, this approach requires much more time and resources to follow, so it is unclear how this additional work will take away from time spent on the actual mission of the program.

***Each of these three approaches provides a feasible solution to the current issues with voluntourism. Through deliberation, we will examine each of these in detail with the goal of finding the most appropriate answer to the problem.***

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