

Does “Voluntourism” Benefit Both Giving and Receiving Parties?

Any pre-med student ~~feels~~ knows the push for volunteer work in spicing up their application. Many choose to volunteer in local hospitals, clinics, or senior living homes to get experience in their desired fields. ~~More recently than ever, especially with “gap years” becoming more and more common, advertisements for volunteering abroad have been circulating the web.~~

One of my main goals in pursuing medicine is to be able to volunteer my skills and offer help in underprivileged communities locally and globally. Because of this, I want to volunteer with Mercy Ships and Doctors Without Borders, two well-established humanitarian organizations that take doctors abroad to treat communities lacking modern healthcare practices. I have always loved travelling, and providing medical treatments in underprivileged foreign countries is especially appealing to me. I brought this up with my advisor, and he told me to be careful when volunteering abroad as it could often harm the community more than it would help. This surprised me, and I became interested in- the potential consequences for both the giving and receiving parties that engage with global humanitarian projects. I researched the pros and cons of volunteering abroad and found that negative opinions stem from misplaced motivation and intent of volunteers, exploitation of social media, and lack of qualifications as well as time commitment. Positive opinion on the other hand focuses on the effects of volunteering on physical and emotional health, the experience of a life-time volunteering abroad provides, and the improvement these humanitarian efforts have on global relations.

“Voluntourism” refers to the act of volunteering abroad (Northover 2018). It indicates an individual that volunteers time and resources while also touring and exploring the foreign lands they visit. With such a label, it begs the question: What is the voluntourist’s main priority and

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motivation? Some voluntourists enjoy a “new kind of contemporary tourism boom” (Garland 2015). One that involves going to a third world country for varying lengths of time, documenting their activities through cameras and smartphones, and sharing those images on their social media, all in the name of humanitarian work.

Showing the negative side of voluntourism, renowned Haitian poet, Felix Morisseau-Leroy, addresses the issue of poverty and the tourist’s gaze in Haiti through his poem “Tourist.”

Tourist, don’t take my picture/ Don’t take my picture, tourist/ I’m too ugly/ Too dirty/ Too skinny/ Don’t take my picture, white man.../You don’t understand my position/ You don’t understand anything/ About my business, tourist... (Garland 2015).

Due to voluntourists and their images they post to their social media, Haiti has been painted as a country that is inevitably failing, an outcry of pity and helplessness. Labeling theory would suspect that in turn of being seen by foreign men as a community in distress, Haiti would identify themselves as such and continue to welcome these white-saviors and maintain their dependent status.

Not only does advertising one’s humanitarian exploits potentially cast doubt on one’s motivation, but the lack of knowledge and skill that many of these volunteers bring to the table often don’t contribute much to the community they are visiting. There have been cases of unqualified volunteers replacing local health professionals because they think they can “do it better” than those locals they thought to have lacked the proper modern training. Volunteer efforts also tend to shirk the more pressing, complex issues like education, infrastructure, limited resources, etc, and focus on more superficial problems. “Context matters. Communities don’t passively wait for foreigners to fix things. During disasters, the majority of meaningful

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volunteers are usually from the communities themselves” (Sullivan 2018). People in the community They know the situation, the history, the culture and are able to make more of an impact. Short-term international volunteering can often outweigh the positives since. Logistics make it hard for anyone to drop into a foreign country and make their short term of service valuable. There is a learning curve in which a short commitment of time simply makes it impossible for that volunteer to truly understand the community or be of much use.

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It has already been noted that voluntourists are often extrinsically motivated by gap-years, resumes, and social media recognition; to seek global volunteer opportunities, but it has been found that it is often their sincere desire and satisfaction that motivates them to continue volunteering (Tassell 2011). Not only do they feel a sense of moral obligation to further their efforts, but past research has also found a positive association with volunteering, well-being, and physical and mental health. There has even been some studies that found inding a link between volunteering and a decrease in all-risk mortality (Ayalon 2011). Evidently, the health and emotional benefits to volunteering is extremely worthwhile for the voluntourist, and to add the aspect of learning and experiencing a new culture simultaneously only increases the benefits to the voluntourist. “Without a doubt, it is essential that individuals have an incredible experience while volunteering abroad. They have often planned, saved, and fundraised for months to embark on the volunteering trip of a lifetime” (Northover 2018). Why shouldn’t voluntourists enjoy themselves and explore? Adventure is not their main focus, but there is no reason they can’t experience the foreign land they are visiting.

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While benefits of volunteering abroad abound for voluntourists, some may argue that voluntourists undoubtedly receive more benefit from their projects than the community they were serving. With voluntourism, Considering the foreign community’s point of view, foreign

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community members they are introduced to new culture, new technology, and ultimately a new way of thinking. Humanity has developed throughout the ages as a result of innovation.

Innovation is a result of creativity that is often sparked by novelty. So perhaps there are more latent functions that underlie this relationship between foreign volunteers and an underprivileged community. Peter Devereux, with a PhD in long-term international volunteers in development and sustainability, has a positive view of the potential that global humanitarian efforts can offer. "International volunteering has the potential to challenge the economic and technical focus of globalization in favor of people connecting and relating with each other on a global scale. Long-term international volunteering can thus deepen the relational nature of development and the power of solidarity" (2008). International volunteering can be seen as paternalistic charity (pity and a sense of obligation to help a struggling country) or a self-serving quest to amp one's resume and life experiences. It can also be a mechanism to strengthen global relations and combat the root of poverty and injustice. Genuine volunteers that learn and value the history and culture of the community they are visiting can make a lasting impact. In this regard, voluntourism can in fact strengthen global relations and build a foundation of respect and trust.

"Voluntourism," admittedly does have some negative connotations as images of the "white-savior" holding a starving child flashes across social media. Some international volunteers may even reinforce pre-existing stereotypes of third world countries, viewing them as "binaries of us and them" (Sherraden 2008) such as in the aforementioned Haiti example. Others volunteers may lack the necessary skills and knowledge to render any service that is worth such a large investment. On the other hand, there are countless benefits for both giving and receiving parties if the volunteer's motivation and priority are in line with truly serving the communities they

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visit. In the end, however, it is important to never replace any local professionals nor enforce new methods of practice. Local residents know their environment and traditions best. It is important to assist and provide services that will help the receiving community regain or develop independence. Therefore, when searching for a humanitarian organization to join, it is equally important to research methods and intent of that organization to make sure the volunteer efforts of that individual are truly uplifting and beneficiary for that community. If motivation and priority are well-intentioned, then voluntourism is a great way to explore the world while making a positive impact in it.

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