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# Volunteer tourism defies recession but is this positive news for the South?

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Despite reports that the international tourism market has suffered during the downturn, one strand of tourism – the gap year and volunteer tourism market – seems to have flourished [3]. This can partly be attributed to the increase in redundancies, which has prompted more people to take time out to reflect on what to do next and to gain a new perspective on life. Shortage of graduate jobs has also encouraged undergraduates to escape the gloomy outlook at home to gain valuable work experience to give their CVs a winning edge for when they return. This influx of volunteers to the South, armed with the desire to contribute time, money and skills to a poorer society is surely a good thing. Or is it?

Volunteering abroad is often seen as a win-win enterprise. Individuals gain enriching life experiences, get to travel to a different country and can add to their CV while making a difference to someone's life or protecting the environment. However, it is this notion that volunteering abroad can always 'make a difference' that is damaging. Volunteers are led to believe they have the appropriate skills and cultural understanding to meet the perceived needs of the developing world without stepping back to think about what exactly it is they are contributing and whether it is of use.

The projects that volunteer tourism organisations promote encourage volunteers to think that development is something that can be 'done' to the poor [4] - teaching, building, caring. Whilst all these activities are not in themselves inherently bad, they encourage a simplistic view of development, and reinforce power relations in favour of the developed world; poor people have needs that volunteers can understand and meet whilst those in the developing world cannot.

## Profits before ethics?

The voluntary tourism sector is now largely driven by the market and the demands of tourists, so host communities have little power over how things are developed, managed and run. They rarely have a say in what happens where and why. A report by Tourism Concern [5] highlighted that many volunteer organisations do not even ask for feedback from the project host.

There are currently few mechanisms in place to monitor and evaluate projects. Because volunteer tourism is predominately a profit-driven sector few programmes have skill-set requirements or formal contracts for volunteers; the only requirement is their money (of which little actually ends up with the project either [6]). The value of a volunteer with no relevant

experience or useful skills, who stays for a short period of time and has limited understanding of the local culture or language, is highly questionable. Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) [7] also highlighted this back in 2007 as the gap year market really began to expand.

### **Reinforcing or reducing inequality and difference?**

The nature of volunteer tourism (being demand driven) is such that the pattern of volunteering does not necessarily reflect real need or poverty levels. Many of the most vulnerable countries are regarded as unsafe and therefore may be undesirable to volunteers. Far more attractive is somewhere exotic, safe, warm and offering a degree of adventure and interaction with different cultures or charismatic animals. In the majority of cases volunteer tourism is first and foremost a holiday.

Volunteering often reduces the world to the developed and the developing - reinforcing differences between the 'poor' and the 'rich' rather than promoting similarities and encouraging the exchange of ideas. Differences are emphasised through a lack of understanding of the complex issues surrounding people's needs. For example, volunteers can come into close contact with poverty. But instead of critically questioning and engaging with issues, poverty is rationalised as something that happens to the poor.

Worse still, volunteers often come away reasoning that people are poor but happy. Poverty is not viewed as something that can be experienced by people anywhere, but as something suffered by people in the developing world. How often have we heard someone say; 'Volunteering abroad made me feel so lucky and to appreciate what I have'? The systems and structures at the heart of the problem are never called into question.

### **Here to stay?**

Volunteer tourism is not going to disappear. In order for the sector to bring benefits to hosts as well as tourists it needs to be driven at a local level to meet local needs. Yet, at the same time, the industry must be better aligned at a global level in order to maximise opportunities and support. Regulations must be put in place for companies that send volunteers abroad – to ensure greater transparency about where money goes and how involved host communities are in planning and managing projects, and with local investment into projects and long-term commitment from the volunteer organisation. But this could result in companies having to accept lower profits or even having to close down. So for the time being voluntary regulation is the best we can hope for - for example see The Year Out Group [8], Fairtrade Volunteering [9] and Ethical Volunteering [10].

Pre-acceptance interviews and pre-departure training are essential to effectively match volunteers' skills to appropriate projects. Volunteers should also be briefed so that their expectations are realistic and they are clear about what they will be doing, where their money is going, and what they can really contribute. Organisations should actively encourage volunteers to question why global differences occur rather than just accepting them.

Despite the obvious weaknesses of volunteer tourism, it can work – if volunteers have skills that the host requires, if they go for a significant length of time, and if the communities involved have a voice in developing and managing projects. In these cases it can act as a major force for development. Unfortunately, volunteer tourism in its current structure does not address real need. It has been shaped and driven by what tourists want.

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[5] <http://www.tourismconcern.org.uk/index.php?page=gap-years>

[6] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/money/2010/jun/26/paying-price-gap-year-adventure>

[7] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6945370.stm>

[8] <http://www.yearoutgroup.org/>

[9] <http://fairtradevolunteering.com/>

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