

BBC NEWS

MAGAZINE

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Viewpoint: Is gap year volunteering a bad thing?

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Volunteering abroad to build schools or dig wells might make people feel good about themselves - but it can be detrimental to those who are supposed to be helped, writes tour company founder Daniela Papi.

I've volunteered all over the world - building homes in Papua New Guinea, doing post-tsunami work in Sri Lanka, helping paint a school in Thailand - and I used to think it was the best way to travel.

In 2005 I even organised my own volunteer trip - a bike ride across Cambodia with five friends. We were going to raise funds to build a school, and teach students we met along the way about the environment and health.

There turned out to be more than one small problem. We didn't really know that much about the environment or health - or Cambodia for that matter.

Much of the money we had raised for other small projects had been wasted, or landed in corrupt hands. And that school we helped to build? Well, when I arrived to see it, I found a half-empty building.

I decided to stay in Cambodia a bit longer to see how we could better use our time and money. That bit longer eventually turned into six years living in Cambodia and that first school building turned into an education NGO (non-governmental organisation).

To raise money for our work, I started a volunteer travel company that led hundreds of volunteers on trips to Cambodia.

At first, our tours looked a lot like that first bike ride, with foreigners coming in to "serve" people in places they knew very little about. I slowly stopped believing in our "voluntourism" offerings and began to see that young people didn't need more fabricated opportunities to "serve" but rather opportunities to learn how to better contribute their time and money in the future.

I feel that the growing practice of sending young people abroad to volunteer is often not only failing the communities they are meant to be serving, but also setting these travellers, and by extension our whole society, up for failure in the long run.

Hundreds of thousands of young people are going abroad to volunteer each year, as part of school requirements, to build their CVs, and as part of gap year trips.

Yet much of this demand is fuelled by the belief that because we come from financially wealthier countries, we have the right, or the obligation, to bestow our benevolence on people. Never mind if we don't speak the language, don't have the skills or experience to qualify for the jobs we're doing, or don't know anything about what life is like "over there".

As a former serial volunteer myself, I'm not in any way trying to criticise the good intentions of these volunteer travellers - I know from my own experience that our desire to help is sincere - but I now also know that good intentions are not enough.

Our lack of critical engagement about international volunteering is creating a double standard.

When someone goes for a work experience or internship placement in a law firm or an accounting company, they don't expect to be leading a case in a courtroom, or managing their own clients - they understand their number one job is to learn (and bring the coffee). Yet when we go abroad, we sometimes forget that we have to learn before we can serve.

It's like we think we are all Clark Kent. At home we slave away and work hard to be useful in our jobs, but then we enter a magical phone booth and - ta-dah - we take off to a far-away country and somehow our Superman suit, or our volunteer T-shirt, gives us all of the

power and knowledge we need to save the world.

We're teaching our next generation of leaders that development work is easy, and that their skills are so valuable to the people abroad that it is worth donating money to send them to help.

And we're teaching them that, just because they come from the UK or the US, they are in a position of superiority over the people they are going to "serve".

We must stop volunteering abroad from becoming about us fulfilling our dreams of being heroes. The travellers are not just missing out on learning the lessons that lead to more sustainable changes in themselves and in the world, but they are also often negatively impacting the people they are meant to be "serving".

Orphanage volunteering is one of the most popular volunteer travel offerings in part because it fits with both our desire to be heroes and our desire for fun.

Volunteering to take care of orphans might not sound too bad at first - at least I didn't think so on my initial orphanage visits.

But then I started to realise that my visit repeated over and over and over again can indeed become a problem.

Imagine if an orphanage near your home had a rotating door of volunteers coming to play with these children who have already been deemed vulnerable.

Imagine if, during times when they were meant to be in school, they were performing "orphanage dance shows" day after day to visiting tourists. Imagine if any tourist could come in off the street and take one of the children out for the day with them? You are right in any assumptions you might have about what type of harm that could expose them to.

In Cambodia, orphanage volunteering has become a big business. While the number of orphans has decreased, the number of orphanages has risen with the rise of tourism. Unicef estimates that three out of every four children in Cambodian orphanages actually have one or more living parents.

The most corrupt orphanage managers even have an incentive to keep the children looking poor, because, as I have heard many travellers say, tourists often want to give their time and money to the poorest looking place, as they think that is where it is needed most.

People often say, "doing something is better than doing nothing". But it isn't. Not when that something is often wasteful at best, and at worst causing a lot of harm.

We need to focus on learning first - not just encouraging jumping in. Like the legal intern delivering coffee and learning what it takes to be a good lawyer, their most significant impact in the role is not achieved in a short time, but rather in avoiding being too much of a distraction in the short-term and learning how to have a real impact in the long run.

We can encourage young people to move from serving, to learning how to serve. It's a small change in vocabulary, but it can have a big impact on our futures.

This piece is based on an edited version of [Daniela Papi's Four Thought on BBC Radio 4](#)

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212. Anglophone

1ST MAY 2013 - 9:25

+115

It's good for the kids to see a bit of the world but, in truth, the money would be far more effectively spent employing local people to do the work themselves thus aiding the local economy.

211. Lindsay

1ST MAY 2013 - 9:24

+14

I agree its a farce that people get recognition from employers for a trip which their parents or other people essentially funded - I went abroad for 10 months to build my skills and mature as an employee - I worked for 8 months in the UK full time to pay for it and the money I earned through my employment abroad I spent while I was there so the money was being reinvested into the local economy.

210. witness2gr8ness

1ST MAY 2013 - 9:24

+50

Agree with the author, I did volunteer work in Cambodia and became highly cynical of NGOs. Organisation was a shambles, I built homes with poor quality wood that would rot within two years, there was a terrible waste of money with no accountability and top it all off the head of the team there regularly used prostitutes - exploiting the very people we were supposed to be helping.

209. Secretbanker

1ST MAY 2013 - 9:23

+85

Save us from 'do gooders' with their own complicated psychological reasons for doing so. If you really want to do something try picking up litter at home, clearing urban overgrown areas, helping in care homes as visitors (not staff as they are badly paid enough as it is), and make the UK a better place. Too many UK projects are run by pensioners as only they have the time, but rather quaint ideas

206. Th1nk-about-it

1ST MAY 2013 - 9:22

+146

Rich westerners (including young people who can afford a long break after school or university!) can best help developing countries by taking organised holidays, buying local goods, in other words paying money for services as we do at home. Please don't do work that local people could earn money for, or set up schemes they cannot sustain. Help build the real economy instead of creating dependency.

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