

Exposé reveals dark heart of voluntourism

Should you be a voluntourist?
 Each year, thousands of young Westerners travel to developing countries to give something back to the most vulnerable. Could they be doing more harm than good?



Wow: 1.6 million people volunteer internationally each year. © 10-International Citizen Service

We've all seen it. The Instagram picture of a **harem pants**-wearing student cuddling grateful local children. #lifechanging.

But in yesterday's *Guardian*, Tina Rosenberg revealed how these young volunteers may be tearing apart the very communities they're claiming to help.

In exchange for a (sometimes hefty) fee, a growing number of charities are sending students and young people to developing nations where they can build houses, visit orphanages and generally help the local community.

"We ... were so bad at the most basic construction work that each night the men had to take down the structurally unsound bricks we had laid and rebuild the structure," said one American volunteer in Tanzania.

Rather than pay local people to carry out the work and support the local economy, some charities would rather make money by having young Westerners pay for the opportunity.

Volunteering schemes in orphanages are particularly **controversial**. The money they can

attract from travellers make the institutions — where neglect and abuse is rife — lucrative businesses.

One orphanage in Haiti collected donations averaging \$10,000 a year per child. According to a former staff member, most of this money ended up in the director's bank account.

Some institutions even employ "**baby-finders**" to convince vulnerable families that their child would be better off in an orphanage.

The children, however, often receive little help. One student wrote that the orphanage they visited "has a lot of great equipment that has been donated but it is sitting unused".

In his article "The **White-Saviour** Industrial Complex," Teju Cole wrote that "this world exists simply to satisfy the needs — including, importantly, the sentimental needs — of white people".

Researcher Nicole Wilke is more positive.

"These people are not the enemy. They are the solution here." She believes that rather than discouraging volunteers from travelling overseas, we should be finding ways they can

help that are genuinely beneficial.

Should you be a voluntourist?

Gap yah

Absolutely not, say some. Voluntourism encourages unscrupulous charities to exploit and ignore local communities, while wealthy students get to return home feeling pleased with themselves. Long-term change happens when communities are given the tools to learn how to support themselves, not rely on strangers. It's self-indulgent and destructive.

Young volunteers can be really useful and responsible, argues journalist **Rosie Spinks**. For example, by staying in locally-owned hotels and seeking out community organisations run by local people. Many will have their understanding widened by their experience abroad and be more likely to engage with international development in the future.



Q: What do we know?

A: Voluntourism emerged in the 1990s out of the ecotourism movement, which focused on supporting conservation efforts and observing natural wildlife. The trend was an attempt to seek a more "authentic" experience of other

countries and rebel against the popularity of package holidays and resorts. There is a consensus that orphanages are almost always worst for children than remaining with their families, which is why most wealthy nations have stopped institutionalising children.

Q: What do we not know?

A: Whether volunteering overseas makes a

person more charitable in the long run. A study of Americans who travelled to Honduras to build houses following an earthquake in 1998 found that years later this experience had made no difference to how much they gave to charity or volunteered.

YOU DECIDE

1. Does voluntourism do more harm or good?
2. Is it better to donate to charity or to volunteer for a charity?

ACTIVITIES

1. Make a checklist of things a volunteer should think about and check before travelling abroad to ensure they are volunteering responsibly.
2. After doing some research, write a one-page essay on whether “white saviour” is a useful term.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

“I will never retweet appeals that treat poor children as opportunities to enhance Westerners’ CVs.”
J.K. Rowling

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

WORD WATCH

Harem pants – Loose-fitting trousers gathered at the ankle.

Controversial – The number of orphanages in Cambodia is rapidly increasing. Not because they are needed by local children, but because there are so many Australians willing to pay to

work in them. In May 2016, the London School of Economics set up a group of universities who have pledged not to advertise orphanage placements to their students.

Baby-finders – According to a 2005 study by Save the Children, 92% of children in orphanages in Sri Lanka had a living parent. In 2006, Unicef found that 98% of children living in orphanages in Liberia were not orphans.

White-Saviour – The term refers to white people who attempt to “fix” the problems of struggling nations or “save” people of colour without understanding their history or the needs of their community.

Rosie Spinks – See the link to Spinks’s article for *Quartz* in Become An Expert.

BECOME AN EXPERT

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 Notes

