A Debate about Voluntourism

Facilitators Overview

This discussion is based on two articles from The Guardian, which were written in conversation with one another. While one problematizes voluntourism as an industry, the second attempts to defend its value.

In discussion, students can discuss the merits of each position, explore their own views about voluntourism, and speculate about how they will integrate their experience into their own lives.

This discussion works pre-field, in-field, or post-field.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are Ossob Mohamud’s main issues with voluntourism? What are some of the ethical issues at stake? Do you agree with these views? Why, why not, to what extent?
2. What are the implications of Ossob Mohamud’s views for the industry, for service-oriented work, for international relations, and for volunteers like yourself?
3. What defense does Sam Blackledge offer? What ethical issues does he raise? How do you feel about his optimistic perspective?
4. What are some of the differences between these articles? How are they different in style, structure, approach, rhetoric, and tone? Do these differences affect how we assess their arguments? How so?
5. How do you think Ossob Mohamud might respond to Sam Blackledge?
6. How do you feel about your own volunteer work? How can you – or how can we as a group – address the issues of privilege, status, and short-term impact that inevitably play a role in our endeavor?

Post-field journaling: Write your own reflection or blog post about Voluntourism. What is your perspective on these concerns, on the voluntourist industry, on international education? What role did status and privilege play in your trip? How did you feel during your interactions with the locals? How would you respond to both of these journalists? What advice would you give future students, service organizations in the U.S., and local communities abroad?
Beware the 'voluntourists' doing good
The volunteer travel industry is thriving but there are better ways to combat poverty than using developing world as playground

Ossob Mohamud

I recently came across an interesting article questioning voluntourism and assessing whether it does more harm than good in communities of the global south. It reminded me of my own concerns with "voluntourism" that originated in my college years in which I had participated in Alternative Spring Breaks. It was considered an alternative to what most college students did on their vacations: spending idle time by the poolside. The university-organised trips sent students to spend a week in disadvantaged and poverty-stricken communities to volunteer. This could take the form of teaching English at the local school, assisting in building and beautifying new homes for residents, or environmental cleanups. Interspersed throughout the week were also touristy getaways and souvenir shopping. Although I had memorable and rewarding moments, I could never shake off the feeling that it was all a bit too self-congratulatory and disingenuous.

Voluntourism almost always involves a group of idealistic and privileged travelers who have vastly different socio-economic statuses vis-à-vis those they serve. They often enter these communities with little or no understanding of the locals' history, culture, and ways of life. All that is understood is the poverty and the presumed neediness of the community, and for the purposes of volunteering, that seems to be enough. In my own experiences – also highlighted by the author of the article – this has led to condescending and superficial relationships that transform the (usually western) volunteer into a benevolent giver and the community members into the ever grateful receivers of charity. It makes for an extremely uncomfortable dynamic in which one begins to wonder if these trips are designed more for the spiritual fulfillment of the volunteer rather than the alleviation of poverty.

I couldn't help feeling ashamed at the excessive praise and thanks we received from locals and those on the trip alike. I cringed as we took complimentary photos with African children whose names we didn't know. We couldn't even take full credit for building the houses because most of the work had already been done by community members. In fact, if anything we slowed down the process with our inexperience and clumsiness. And how many schools in the west would allow amateur college students to run their English classes for a day? What had I really done besides inflate my own ego and spruce up my resume? I had stormed into the lives of people I knew nothing about, I barely engaged with them on a genuine level, and worst of all, I then claimed that I had done something invaluable for them all in a matter of five days (of which most of the time was spent at hotel rooms, restaurants, and airports).

An entire industry has sprouted out of voluntourism as it increases in popularity, possibly equal to the increase in global inequality. As the gap between rich and poor widens, so too it seems does the need for those of the global north to assuage the guilt of their privilege (paradoxically, guilt only seems to deepen as many realise the illusory effect of their impact), or to simply look good. The
developing world has become a playground for the redemption of privileged souls looking to atone for global injustices by escaping the vacuity of modernity and globalisation.

But does this address the root institutional and structural causes of the problem? I do not mean to deny, across the board, the importance of the work voluntourists do. Volunteers in developing countries fund and deliver great programmes that would not happen otherwise, but the sustainability and the effectiveness of the approach is what I question. Time and energy would be better spent building real solidarity between disparate societies based on mutual respect and understanding. Instead of focusing on surface symptoms of poverty, volunteers and the organisations that recruit them should focus on the causes that often stem from an unjust global economic order. Why not advocate and campaign for IMF and World Bank reforms? How about having volunteers advocate for their home country to change aggressive foreign and agricultural policies (such as subsidy programmes)? This might seem unrealistic but the idea is to get volunteers to understand their own (direct or indirect) role in global poverty. The idea is to get volunteers truly invested in ending poverty, and not simply to feel better about themselves.

In defence of 'voluntourists'

Ignore the cynics, charity schemes do great work and can benefit both the volunteers and the communities they serve

Sam Blackledge

http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/feb/25/in-defence-of-voluntourism1

The debate about "voluntourism" – that unsightly word – has reared its cynical head yet again. Every so often the spotlight is turned on western students using their free time to help those less fortunate in developing countries, and much head-scratching and soul-searching ensues. Recently the Guardian published a piece by Somalian blogger Ossob Mohamud, with the headline Beware the 'voluntourists' doing good. She argues that the west is turning the developing world into "a playground" for the rich to "assuage the guilt of their privilege". Mohamud clearly had a difficult volunteering experience. She says she felt ashamed at the excessive praise and thanks of locals, cringed as she took photos with African children whose names she did not know and was left feeling that she had simply inflated her ego and spruced up her resume.

There is a discussion to be had about the merits or otherwise of overseas volunteering schemes which attract crowds of well-meaning westerners to build schools and playgrounds, teach English or
care for orphans. But Mohamud's insistence on drawing a wider social message from her own unsatisfactory trip is unfair and potentially damaging.

Last summer I visited Uganda to report on the work of East African Playgrounds. The charity enlists British students to build play facilities and run sporting projects for primary school children. In just a few years it has grown to be self-sufficient, employing a team of young Ugandans as builders, to the point where the charity's British founders will soon be able to step back and let it run itself.

I witnessed the volunteers - students and recent graduates from UK universities - forming genuine friendships with the locals, developing emotional attachments to the children and becoming truly invested in their future. Cynics might that say when they return to Britain they leave it all behind and life moves on. But for many, volunteering can be life changing.

Mark Deeks, 28, was deeply affected by the experience, and is still shaken by the country's poverty, healthcare and corrupt political system. When he returned to university he wrote his masters dissertation on gay rights in Uganda.

He says: "It was the gateway to everything I do today and everything I will go on to do. I was alerted to a whole different world, one so different that it prompted greater evaluation. That prompted within me the desire to study these differences. And that study will lead me to work towards necessary reconciliation of the two. Assuaging guilt never entered into it - I have no guilt. Only pride."

East African Playgrounds founder Tom Gill admits frustration that many quick-fix 'gap year' companies are "built to maximise profits and reduce costs wherever they can" without investing in communities. But, he says, many charities are working hard to counter this.

"Charity in its essence is a chance for those who have more than enough to help those who don't have enough," he says. "If privileged people stopped volunteering and making donations then what would happen to the work of thousands of charities worldwide?"

"Volunteers play a vital role in the model of charities that are looking to become financially independent and self-sufficient. Charities that rely heavily on grants and trusts have almost all suffered reductions in donations, which has a huge impact on the ground with funding having to be pulled from grassroots projects.

"No approach is without its flaws, but it is vital that people do not group charities doing this well with companies who are putting very little into the developing world."

Undergraduates face a stark choice about how to spend their time before entering employment, particularly now that money is tight and jobs are scarce. Charities that invest in the developing world need keen, energetic, ambitious people to help them along. "Voluntourists" they may be – but their work can have a huge impact on their own lives and the lives of those they help. It would be an awful shame if they were put off.