“Poverty Tourism Can Make Us Thankful Soujourners”
(Kent Annan – Huffington Post, 1/3/2011)

Discussion or Reflection Activity – before or during field experience

Share the attached short article with your program participants before or during your international service experience. Use the questions below as a guide for a group reflection to explore topics including: ethical & effective service, impact made, future engagement, so what – now what.

Some possible questions for discussion or as a prompt for a reflection paper:

-Initial thoughts/reactions?

-How may our presence and actions be exploitive? What can we do to avoid this?

-How can/will you posture yourself as a learner in this experience?

-What does humility look like in this context; how is humility displayed/conveyed?

-What is an appropriate attitude or posture we should demonstrate when involved in this experience?

-What would be “differences between traveling as a poverty tourist and a citizen of the world?”

-What do you hope the long lasting impact of your experience will be?

-What commitments can/will you make as a result of this experience?
Poverty Tourism Can Make Us Thankful Soujourners
by Kent Annan

The jolt in Port-au-Prince herniated a disk in my lower back last month. The pain is making it hard to sleep at night. I’ve walked with a sideways bent and haven’t been able to pick up my two young children since.

But here’s the thing: The jolt happened while riding a motorcycle taxi to a meeting in a tent camp where 50,000 people live under tarps. So I can’t much indulge in feeling sorry for myself.

I travel to Haiti regularly for work with a nonprofit, but right now I’m back in Florida where I have a safe, dry home to sleep in; I have a bed; I’ve already been to the physical therapist four times; I can afford ibuprofen, Tylenol, and Aleve; I eat more than enough each day. You get the idea.

So when I start complaining, then remember this context, it seems my basic choices are either to be grateful or to be an ass.

On one hand, this is the proper perspective. On the other, this is a potentially exploitative “benefit” of what are typically called some variation of a “service trip,” but are also sometimes critically called “poverty tourism.”

We see people suffering so much more than us, and then come back and say, “It just makes you so grateful for what you have.” Or, “It puts life in perspective.”

The motorcycle taxi driver I was riding with lost a staggering amount in the earthquake. The church he attends collapsed on more than 200 people inside, his friends, his relatives. After getting off his motorcycle, I was soon talking with people in the camp who lost everything and have little reasonable hope for improvement any time soon.

A sore back? Sheesh.

But if the longest lasting result of my working in or visiting a place with much suffering, is that I feel a little better about my own life … well, then I’ve probably exploited people struggling with poverty even more than they’re being exploited already.

So for me, three differences come to mind to keep these trips from being “poverty tourism”: First, who and how do I visit people? Is it marked by dignity, without patronizing, with humility, as a learner. Are we visiting with people or an organization who have respectful, engaged relationships with the community? What kind of photos do we take or stories do we tell? What side comments do we make to our fellow travelers? Do we ask ourselves the hard questions? How do we, or shouldn’t we, talk about “them?”

Second, and related, does it make a difference to how I live “back home?” In how I give, what politics I engage in, or in whatever the area is that we each can make a difference to the systems that perpetuate pain. How do I think and talk and act?

Third, is my visit only the beginning of a long-term commitment to finding effective ways to help? Even if I worked hard to build a community center or learning language or to add on to a church building, it wasn’t much in the big picture. People are often gracious hosts and share the best part of their smiles and
lives with us when we visit. But sometimes that seems to give us an excuse to quarantine the unsettling part of our experience, the part that might demand a lot of us.

These are some of the factors for me. I’m in Haiti many times a year, but I still need to check myself.

If we come back with a kind of souvenir that makes us feel more comfortable about our lives, then it’s likely been exploitation. If we come back and we’re more uncomfortable, and also committed to smart, respectful ways to help, then maybe we properly honor the hospitality we’ve received.

Can we find good ways to contribute to each other’s well being?

Some people think there shouldn’t be these exchanges at all. I don’t agree. I think they’re important for working for justice. But I do think there are differences between traveling as a poverty tourist and a citizen of the world.

Kent Annan is co-director of Haiti Partners (www.haitipartners.org), which has set up an Earthquake Response Fund. He is the author of After Shock, which explores questions of faith, doubt, and searching, and he is also the author of Following Jesus Through the Eye of the Needle: Living Fully, Loving Dangerously, which is about living and working in Haiti.