Facilitator Overview

**Pre-field:** Have students read the article and discuss it as a group.

**Discussion Questions:**

- Find a sentence that really stands out to you in this article. Why did it strike you? What about it resonated or didn’t sit well with you?
- What are the ethical issues with voluntourism, according to this article? Do you think this is a fair portrayal? Why or why not?
- What might an ethical model of voluntourism look like?
- Zakaria calls the western drive toward voluntourism an attempt to escape the intangible problems of our own countries. What do you think about this theory? What does it imply about us, about other cultures, and about the problems we are trying to solve?
- Is the trip we are about to undertake an example of “voluntourism”? How do you feel about the label?
- How can we address the ethical issues that we are facing as voluntourists on our trip?

**During or Post-field follow-up:** Have students revisit the issues that they raised in this discussion, or have students read this article as a springboard for discussing the ethical issues at stake in their own learning experience. You can use the questions above, as well as the following:

- What expectations did you have going into the trip? How did your experience change how you thought about your own role in the group and community?
- How are you going to talk about this experience with those who ask?
  a. What stories are you going to tell?
  b. What lessons will you claim to have learned?
  c. What advice will you give those who want to have a similar experience?
The White Tourist’s Burden

Growing Western demand for altruistic vacations is feeding the white-savior industrial complex

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by Rafia Zakaria @rafiazakaria

My friend Jack likes to tell his favorite story about a summer he spent volunteering in Colombia. He recounts that story anytime he’s handed the opportunity, at parties, lunch meetings and airports. He highlights varying facets of the story on different occasions — the snake he found in his tent, his camaraderie with the locals and his skills at haggling. The message to his audience is clear: I chose hardship and survived it.

If designer clothes and fancy cars signal material status, his story of a deliberate embrace of poverty and its discomforts signals superiority of character. As summer looms, many Americans — college students, retirees and others who stand at the cusp of life changes — will make similar choices in search of transformational experiences. An industry exists to make these easier to make: the voluntourism business.

A voluntourist is someone like Jack, who wishes to combine exotic vacation travel with volunteer work. For anyone interested in being one, a dizzying array of choices awaits, from building schools in Uganda or houses in Haiti to hugging orphans in Bali. In all of them, the operational equation is the same: wealthy Westerners can do a little good, experience something that their affluent lives do not offer, and, as in Jack’s case, have a story to tell that places them in the ranks of the kindhearted and worldly wise.

As admirably altruistic as it sounds, the problem with voluntourism is its singular focus on the volunteer’s quest for experience, as opposed to the recipient community’s actual needs. There is a cost associated with such an endeavor. A 2010 report by the Human Sciences Research Council, based in Pretoria, South Africa, analyzed the thriving AIDS orphan tourism business in South Africa.

Under this program, well-to-do tourists sign up to build schools, clean and restore riverbanks, ring birds and act as caregivers to AIDS orphans for a few weeks. This led to the creation of a profitable industry catering to volunteer tourists. The orphans’ conditions are effectively transformed into a boutique package in which “saving” them yields profits from tourists. The foreigners’ ability to pay for the privilege of volunteering crowds out local workers.

Africa is traditionally a favorite destination for those searching for saviordom, but the harms of voluntourism are not limited to that continent. On the Indonesian island of Bali, for example, a burgeoning orphanage industry exists to cater to voluntourists who want to help children. Children leave home and move to an orphanage because tourists, who visit the island a couple of times a year, are willing to pay for their education.

These children essentially work as orphans because their parents cannot afford to send them to school. Instead of helping parents cater to the needs of their children, the tourist demand for orphans to sponsor creates an industry that works to make children available for foreigners who wish to help. When the external help dries up, these pretend orphans are forced to beg on the streets for food and money in order to attract orphan tourism.
The pitfalls of the voluntourism industry go beyond orphanages. For example, Dorinda Elliot, a contributing editor at the Condé Nast Traveler website, writes about a “failed voluntourism project” in Haiti — a set of houses built by an American church. Buoyed by the imagined nobility of their endeavor, the builders failed to consider the needs of the would-be inhabitants. The uneducated families that moved into the houses lacked professional skills and employment to improve their conditions and continued to beg for food long after the tourists left. A community directed approach, instead of a tourist-determined one, would have invested in helping the families develop skills necessary to tackle their primary need, poverty.

In recent years, the ethics of voluntourism, especially its underbelly of exploitation, have been questioned by academics and activists alike. Most of the debate, however, is limited to questioning whether volunteer vacations do more harm than good or how it promotes stereotypes that fuel the engines of a burgeoning white-savior industrial complex.

Typically other people’s problems seem simpler, uncomplicated and easier to solve than those of one’s own society. In this context, the decontextualized hunger and homelessness in Haiti, Cambodia or Vietnam is an easy moral choice. Unlike the problems of other societies, the failing inner city schools in Chicago or the haplessness of those living on the fringes in Detroit is connected to larger political narratives. In simple terms, the lack of knowledge of other cultures makes them easier to help.

This imagined simplicity of others’ problems presents a contrast to the intangible burdens of post-industrial societies. Western nations are full of well-fed individuals plagued by less explicit hardships such as the disintegration of communities and the fraying of relationships against the possibilities of endless choices. The burdens of manic consumption and unabated careerism are not as easily pitied as crumbling shanties and begging babies. Against this landscape, volunteerism presents an escape, a rare encounter with an authenticity sorely missed, hardship palpably and physically felt — for a small price.

Despite its flaws, the educational aspect of voluntourism’s cross-cultural exchange must be saved, made better instead of being rejected completely. Natalie Jesionka, a columnist at the Daily Muse, offers future voluntourists some direction on making a real impact on their trips. She emphasizes the need for the volunteer to adapt to the culture, to be flexible, relevant and realistic. In addition to fostering mutual understanding, this would create less-domineering, nonjudgmental volunteers who are not obsessed with the pursuit of the emotional highs (and photo ops) of the altruism they paid for. It would also enable the dislocation of the stereotype that finds need and want in other and exotic places by revealing the same dimensions within their own locales and the connections between the marginalized of here and the excluded of there.

If Jack and other voluntourists could do such simple due diligence, their efforts would be more meaningful beyond good party stories and Facebook profile pictures and, more important, promote a more robust global interconnectedness than what exists today.

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The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera America's editorial policy.