
Research Essay On The Advantages And Disadvantages To Volunteerism

Volunteerism consists of a multitude of non-governmental organizations with thousands of volunteer opportunities worldwide. Millions of well-intended people are willing to give their time to make a difference. Volunteerism is now more than a \$173 billion dollar industry with a goal to immerse and impact hosting communities. Having a clear understanding of how the advantages of volunteer tourism motivate participants is essential in connecting it to the negative outcomes. It appears as though not only will volunteers be improving the lives of disadvantaged communities across the world, but they will receive mass levels of gratification and self-esteem.

However, when understood, these benefits are linked to the issues of the underlying egocentrism motivators of volunteer tourism. Following the massive influx in participation within the volunteerism sector, research criticizes the approaches and methods of volunteerism for multiple reasons. The act of volunteering abroad may be depicted as a positive experience, though has detrimental impacts. Not only are these programs not accomplishing the developmental aid goals claimed to be working toward, but could be hindering social ideologies by skewing Westerners' perspectives of developing countries, perpetuating a cycle of poverty, and upholding unethical practices to sustain the demand of volunteer positions.

Volunteerism contributes to the segregation of developed and developing countries that occurs constantly within our daily lives. Many participants are drawn to volunteerism programs through various forms of personal advantages. Benefits of professional enhancement, self-discovery and a craving to travel to new places all demonstrate that pure altruism is not the ultimate motivating factor for these volunteering trips. According to the National Alumni Survey, around "92% of volunteers choose to travel abroad to gain life experiences and grow personally, 85% choose to travel due to the opportunity to experience other cultures. Only 48% of volunteers surveyed wanted to go solely on the fact of volunteering". Though it is not unnatural for volunteers to consider some level of personal gain, many have begun to question whether volunteer tourism exists to benefit volunteers and host communities, or if it is created to satisfy self-interests. Egocentric motivations are not only disruptive from a moral standpoint, but also contribute to a multitude of shortcomings within volunteerism community development efforts. When going into hosting communities with self-interest thoughts, it can affect the quality of work completed. It perpetuates the ideology that the participants demand to feel needed by their host communities, belittling the local citizen's ability to create sustainable solutions for the community.

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However, the issue with egocentrism in volunteerism goes far deeper than personal and professional advancement for volunteers, as it reinforces perspectives that developing countries need developed country allies in order to sustain themselves. The image of Western volunteers coming to aid a developing country further paternalises the social and political divide between the two categories of countries. Though each of the reasonings behind volunteering abroad are separate from one another, the paternalism, neo-colonialism and reinforcement of stereotypes that volunteerism supports have similar origins and characteristics. The impacts of these problems may be less blatant than with other issues, such as the immediate impact of a local community's economy. It stems from the term 'The White Savior Complex', coined by Teju Cole. It is the ideology that people of colour cannot help themselves without a Caucasian person. This thought flows into the ever growing volunteerism industry, as 85% of volunteerists are of a Caucasian descent. The origins of these negative results have been instilled for decades within media productions, and dates as far back as colonialism. Whether it is through medical services, working on a sustainability farm, or, most commonly, caring for children, volunteers tend to adopt the role of savior in these communities, often referred to as the "White Savior Industrial Complex".

Though it may be a subliminal mindset, it is still evident that volunteers, as a result of fixation on acting the hero, exhibit behaviors that reinforce pre-existing stereotypes. By entering a community and assuming that having a Western perspective makes one more knowledgeable of the current problems and strategies for solution, volunteerism automatically marginalizes the power of the local citizens. The Western mindset "promotes attitudes of ethnocentrism that are demeaning toward a community's history of struggles, along with their strengths". The white savior complex encourages volunteers to think of themselves and their team as the ultimate factor in determining success and failure within a community, which limits the community's developmental success. Though it is not only about the colour on an individual's skin, but rather the privilege they carry to their volunteer position. The Western society naively assumes that even with minimal abilities, volunteers are still able to improve the lives of poverty-stricken communities far beyond their reach. Many volunteers envision children within hosting communities to be incapable of sustaining themselves, and results in an overstimulating environment for local children. When volunteers attend communities for short-term periods, it affects the child's psychological and social development. Some programs may only last ten days, which severely reduces the sustainability of projects and ability to participate in lasting cross-cultural exchanges with the children they are interacting with. Many foreigners see this issue, and try to find ways to combat it. Jane Karigo is an American who opened up an orphanage in Kenya that allows for tourists to help sustain its business. Though while she was at the orphanage, she witnessed a volunteer give a child an iPod, which ignited jealous fighting amongst the residents.

Another volunteer took the kids to a go-kart track, which Jane viewed as a frivolous waste of

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resources. “They will not care about go-karts when they are hungry”. The children within these communities are vulnerable and easily influenced. When a volunteer arrives and gives one child a toy over another, they are easily impressed and seek further attention. It results in the loss of self-esteem and perseverance, as they stem from homes that do not have much emotional or financial support to sustain them. Their environment and stimuli they are taught to respond to influences the way they develop their personalities. From having new volunteers every week, it develops severe separation anxiety when children are constantly meeting new people and have no security within their life. The social impact that volunteerism has goes far beyond simply fending off selfish impulses, but also further paternalises developed and developing ideologies and affects children’s psychological development.

With a shifting focus toward self-interested motivations of volunteers, the volunteerism industry has become contradictory to the traditional idea of volunteerism. The UN defines volunteerism “as a set of behaviours which are undertaken willingly for no financial remuneration and which benefit society rather than the individual undertaking the activity”. Volunteerism has unformally changed their statement from benefiting the individuals and local communities, but rather to gain a profit. It has resulted in grand impacts on the economy of the hosting countries. It is contributed by the corruption of agencies who seek to fulfill their profit margins, which results in an aimless loss in money, and precious resources being extracted from the locals due to unskilled volunteers.

Agencies are now seeking to gain volunteer satisfaction, rather than impacting the local communities. According to Thrive Global, “Many international agencies charge an average of \$1000 for a month of volunteering. With the advertising costs, staff salary they will only be able to pay half of the funds to the partner organizations in developing countries. The organizations in the developing countries get an average of \$500 from international organizations, they will only manage to give half or less of it to the real project”. To put it into perspective, the organization will only get an average of \$250 per month, out of the \$1000 a volunteer pays. The money which would go in the pocket of different agencies can make the real difference within a local project. Investing smart in volunteerism can help the project to upgrade and the fund is enough to make a change in developing countries. The high fees charged to be able to volunteer, have little to no transparency. Volunteers are paying blindly into corporations that have little motivation to help. Due to no legal action from local governments, organizations continue to take advantage of naive volunteers, hoping to make a difference.

The consequences of such mistakes are both damaging and enduring, communities are being pushed to the background, becoming more of an advertisement within a larger framework of tourism and adventure, creates in order to appease foreign volunteers. Being that these communities and people are already vulnerable, refocusing their energy toward satisfaction of short-term volunteers perpetuates their poverty and the many issues contributing to it. Though

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this can be revoked and organization fees can be changed, volunteers are simply not educated enough on choosing sustainable programs to pay for.

When volunteers pay money to a corporation, they do not understand that if the humanitarian organization is solely running on volunteer contributions, then some parts of the funds will also support local staffs for working every day in the projects. Unfortunately due to this absence of knowledge, volunteers don't understand that money for programs can be better used on local resources, such as building more homes. A study conducted followed the effects that 162 Americans who travelled to Honduras to build houses after Hurricane Mitch in 1998 had on the local economy. It was reported that "this work had made no difference. The houses in Honduras built by international volunteers cost \$30,000 apiece, including airfare, while local Christian organisations could build them for \$2,000" (Rosenberg). If the volunteers had known to contribute money instead of labour, 15 times more houses could have been built. Another case found that "Two thousand dollars can pay for a week-long trip by an unskilled American volunteer – or it could pay the salary of a village teacher for four months". Shifting the financial means to administration and recurrent costs that support basic local operations can strengthen the local economic climate.

Leadership training for volunteers should be emphasized since more coordination and negotiation capacity is needed to harmonize all stakeholders to integrate services. Money from volunteers are going into band-aid solutions, and short-term effects of the volunteers only continue to have a negative impact on the local economy. Money can be impacted at a higher volume when simply giving funds to the community, rather than a plane ticket. The theme of limited knowledge within volunteers continues to be prevalent, and they are partaking jobs they are unskilled for that results in extracting jobs from local citizens.

A harsh truth often found in volunteerism programs is the reality that volunteers often have little experience, training, or preparation in regards to the work they are attempting to accomplish in developing communities. Within the CBC documentary, *Volunteers Unleashed*, one volunteer just graduated high school in Netherlands, and would be "serving food to patients". He volunteered at the Olorien Community Clinic In Tanzania, founded by Mary Smith. On the first day he drew blood, on second day he assisted with surgery. While it is a noble cause to provide a service that would otherwise be eliminated, there are also innumerable problems that could arise when volunteers have no experience within the medicinal field. Projects are only as productive as the individuals working on them, and the outcomes appear neither positive, nor mutually beneficial, when volunteers essentially have no idea of how to accomplish their intended goals. Volunteers are given plenty of information regarding their living arrangements, tourism opportunities, and the precautions taken for their safety in a foreign country, which are all important. However, little training is provided in the areas of their volunteer work and understanding of the history or conditions of the community they are entering. Volunteers who

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travel across the world to join projects in which they have no prior experience or training may be counterproductive to the entire process, which contradicts the intended purpose of their presence. Not only will unskilled, untrained volunteers have little impact on communities, but in some circumstances could even cause unintentional harm.

While assisting a doctor, another volunteer within the same hospital fainted while performing a surgery on a local Tanzanian patient. The Doctor had to recline himself from the patient, to rescue the volunteer. Though the volunteer recovers, the institution did not have any advanced anesthesiology equipment, resulting her in experiencing more pain and not being able to breath properly. The doctor had to step back from his local citizens, to take care of the foreigner. Furthermore, though foreign volunteers may be unskilled in certain project areas, such as having no ability to perform a medical surgery, most people are capable in other, untouched areas. By focusing all of their efforts on projects in which they have minimal knowledge, volunteers are wasting time and resources that could have been better spent on their individual skill sets. Precious resources are lost within their positions, taking away jobs that could help to sustain a local's life. Without even a basic understanding of the interrelated problems and systems working against a community that is facing extreme poverty, volunteerists cannot expect to create an enduring impact, but rather expect to create a negative economic impact. Blame should not be placed completely on volunteers, however, but potentially on "a lack of conscientiousness on the part of the facilitators in not prioritizing pre-departure preparation and discussion". The typical short length of these programs limits the extent to which volunteers are able to become aware of these issues, therefore it is prior knowledge and research that could make the difference in effective contributions to a developing community.

Many developing countries continue to accept volunteers, as they provide the country with free amenities and labour that they did not have access to previously. Many communities would not be able to function without the role of volunteers, as they provide them with resources. Though in doing so, many unethical practices are being done in order to benefit both the hosting country and the volunteer. In the instance of medical volunteerism, it can undermine the relationship between a global health organization and its partners. When volunteers have relevant skills, they automatically assume that it will help the hosting communities. However, the services they are providing are beyond the community's level of expertise. Oftentimes, medical students and volunteers are required to perform intensive surgeries without sanitization. A study conducted by Novick and Stidham analysed a team of physicians from the United States made 140 trips to 27 institutions in 19 countries to sponsor pediatric cardiac-surgical missions. While the medical missions accomplished many positive things, such as training local caregivers, the results were negative. Three institutions "did not see an increase in the number of cases or the complexity of cases being performed in the facility since the team intervened". Researches documented that the "Political appointees, by either the hospital or government, of individuals who were not capable of advancing the program, perhaps because of ego, were another reason for failure".

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The reason for failure was due to the short-term missions of global health endeavours, combined with the absence of support from the government.

Without stable, collaborative partnerships with local physicians and the health care sector of the government, it is difficult for medical missionaries to sustain practices and ensure institutional memory. It created new barriers of harm, as there is not enough financial support within medical institutions to support patients after they have had advanced procedures. In addition, the ramifications of botched surgeries affect more than just the surgical patients and their families. A poor surgical outcome can lead an entire community or region fearing doctors and surgery. Those travelling to different countries to pursue volunteer work must first be educated about local culture and familiarize themselves with their target communities. Without such preparation, volunteers can fail to relate to local patients and workers. The hospitals do not have enough knowledge of follow-up treatment or care, which perpetuates the cycle of an ever growing health crisis within communities. This is due to the lack of government support that the volunteerism needs, in order to continue on a sustainable path. When local healthcare systems are being dismantled, many volunteer programs are faced with disparity. It poses a question of moral standards; do governments need to build infrastructure and implement systematic programs, if the foreign volunteers will provide it for them? When the AIDS epidemic struck Africa, it was found that “many donors have chosen to channel most of their funds to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other partners rather than to public sector systems”. It creates gaps within the prospective programming that a Country has planned, as it the focus has become on ‘vertical’ issues. As locals begin to hear news of foreign doctors coming to treat their village, they may “decide to wait until Western doctors or teams visit, instead of seeking care by the local doctors” (Unite For Sight).

Oftentimes, it is rich patients who take advantage of free surgical care provided by visiting surgeons despite being able to pay, simply because they incorrectly believe that the Western visitors provide higher quality surgery. A study of anesthesia care conducted by Operation Smile volunteers concluded that although the complication rate associated with facial-cleft surgery in the field was similar to rates in the Global North, the brevity of missions may contribute to avoidable illness and death. It was found that operations can indeed be emotionally charged, and “Operation Smile volunteers have been accused by local surgeons of 'dumping' their complications when their mission is over, though the organization refutes this charge”. It is as though Western volunteers might as well build hospitals and educational institutions, instead of the local government. Local practitioners who must earn a living in the community cannot compete with the volunteers who donate their services. Furthermore, they cannot provide the same volume of free care over sustained periods and remain financially viable. Because the patient population has not been closely analyzed, it is difficult to assess the precise impact on the local health care delivery system. If these groups actually do compete with local providers, the possibility exists that they could be put out of business, further restricting access to health

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care, as the local government can turn a blind eye to the systematic issues, since volunteers appear to be fixing it for them.

By ignoring local systems, it perpetuates the vulnerability of minors and children placed under the control of volunteers. A popular sector of Volunteerism is noted as 'Orphanage Tourism' where volunteers can take the role of a social worker, and operate an orphanage. Since the government or institutions do not take the precaution of doing background check to ensure the best possible care for their orphans, the volunteers are carelessly placed amongst vulnerable children. In a study conducted by Antje Monshausen, she analyzed 44 volunteer projects, and 41 involved working with children. Researchers found that 79% of operators "did not ask volunteers for a resume, and almost none asked for references. Less than half checked criminal records, and only 16% asked about previous job experience". The relationship between placing unchecked volunteers to take control over vulnerable children, has detrimental impacts. In 2014, Matthew Durham arrived at Upendo Children's Centre to volunteer with neglected children. Durham had previously volunteered at the school three times before. Within the span of 33 days, prosecutors stated that he "raped three girls — ages 5, 9 and 15 — at least eight times. During that same time period, he sexually molested a 12-year-old boy twice." Not only did he forcefully sexually abuse the children, he also "psychologically damaged them by taking advantage of their trust he received from the children." People within the village began to form a "real perception among Upendo's local Kenyan community that more pedophiles lurk among the volunteers, especially the male volunteers."

Unfortunately, illicit behavior between volunteers and the children is a prevalent issue within the Volunteerism industry that is not mentioned enough. Another example of this is Gregory Dow. Him and his wife moved from Lancaster in 2016 to open an orphanage in Nairobi, with no prior knowledge of how to operate one. It was later discovered that "Gregory Dow started assaulting older girls at the home and began to beat the pupils, a 12-year-old girl said in victim testimony recorded by police in 2017." In India there continues to be multiple reports within a multitude of children's homes, where volunteers sexually assault and beat adolescents. When intervening these institutions, authorities found that the girls "laughed and burst into tears at once; and then they would fall silent. Fourteen of them appeared to be mentally challenged or were severely depressed." These cases are a miniscule lens into the growing tragedy that these children have to face as their reality. It manipulates services that should benefit children and communities, but rather instills fear and vulnerability. Since orphanage tourism is in high demand, it results in uncooperative people operating them. The creation of a 'black market' trade of children poses unethical risks, just to keep up with the demand for volunteerists. It continually takes advantage of local children and families, as "92% of children in Sri Lanka orphanages have 1 or more parent alive" (UNICEF).

Family's financial dependence on Volunteerism creates the coordinates for the exploitation of

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children by people in transit. Orphanage owners go door-to-door, claiming that they will provide education and adequate healthcare to their child, if they are sold to the orphanages. The orphanages pay them on a monthly basis, hardly enough to sustain 1 person, let alone a household. Due to the little to no legislations or reinforcements from the government, volunteerism continually takes advantage of the vulnerable, and continues to marginalize the economically unstable population within developing communities with unethical tactics. It is clear that there are both advantages and disadvantages to volunteerism, and conflict arises when attempting to determine whether the positive effects outweigh the negative, though there are many indications that prevail the negative impacts over the positive. It is proven that programs which lean toward the side of poverty tourism are not only ineffective methods of helping communities, but are also demeaning and harmful to the individuals of these communities. Rationalization and justification potentially rejects shared responsibility of poverty and inequality, encouraging an overall passive attitude toward addressing these worldwide, multifaceted problems in society.

Many of the shortcoming approaches that volunteerism attempts to pursue is detrimental to the true mission of developmental aid in a political, economic and social sense. It stems from the misunderstanding of the importance of creating sustainable solutions. Organizations and people enter impoverished communities with the mindset of achieving immediate success, not considering that real progress takes time, long-term commitment, and potential to continuously grow. The attempts to combat systems of poverty must be equally as powerful and persistent, as there will undoubtedly be many obstacles to face, requiring revisions and determination from volunteerists. Volunteers may leave their experiences thinking that any help is good help, even if it does not make a lasting difference, but sustainable community development work argues otherwise.

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