

Ethical issues around volunteering in developing countries

Volunteering is a good thing isn't it? Good hearted people giving time and skills to save the world...



There is no doubt that the current hunger for the 'gap year' is an aspect of contemporary society worth reflecting on. In a context with high unemployment, limited university spaces and larger than ever numbers of retirees, people of all ages are taking a 'gap' from their lives here. The experience gained from volunteering (at home or overseas) is being given recognition by universities and employers. People who've worked for some time are looking for opportunities to 'give something back'. Recent retirees are searching for chances to use their retirement usefully. And because there is a demand, organisations appear to supply the opportunity.

Unfortunately, not all of these organisations are quite as good as they appear at first sight. Companies, looking for profit and taking advantage of people's good intentions, charge large "placement fees" which don't necessarily reach the communities hosting volunteers in developing countries. Some organisations offer very little in terms of preparation, support and follow-up – vital to making these experiences useful to both volunteers and hosts.

A further complication comes from unrealistic expectations. Volunteers sometimes come to me expecting to play a major part in 'saving African children'. They find it difficult when the training makes clear that although their presence can be useful, they, the volunteer, will be the main beneficiary of their experience and that the challenge lies in using this experience to transform their own lives *into the future* to the benefit of the world.

The effects on host communities aren't always positive either. Volunteers (and the "cultural baggage" they bring with them) can certainly impact negatively. For example, there is the risk that they disempower local people, set a negative or unrealistic example to young people or drain resources. And this doesn't even take into account their flights' impact on the climate!

Questions for reflection:

- What are the different motivations for volunteering? Which are altruistic and which are selfish?
- Who will make a profit/loss from the volunteer experience?
- This thinkpiece suggests that the volunteer will be the main beneficiary. If this is true, what responsibilities are placed on those who volunteer?

Our model of volunteering attempts to do something different from the norm. Rather than concentrating solely on the good that our volunteers can do while they're overseas, we also put emphasis on what happens **after their return**. When all goes to plan (!), they come back inspired to "Live simply, sustainably and in solidarity with the poor", attacking both the causes and consequences of injustice, having grown through an experience of faith in action and an encounter with poverty in a society different from their own.

The examples of this continuing involvement are encouraging. Returned volunteers have been campaigning about access to anti-retroviral drugs, dropping the debt and climate change. Thousands of pounds have been raised for projects overseas through talks and sponsored events. Some have considered religious vocation, while others have found their way back to an active faith that means something to them. A number have become youth workers or teachers, or found ways to introduce aspects of the 'global' into their work or free time. These experiences truly can be life-changing!

Find out more at

<http://boscovolunteeraction.co.uk/>