

The false promises of voluntourism

June 20, 2017 By [Stahili0](#) [Comments](#)



Volunteering abroad is seen by many as a good way to spend a ‘gap year’ – and volunteering with children is one of the most popular options. But unskilled “voluntourism” involving children is not a good idea. In our latest post by former volunteers, Clemmy Rich describes what happened to her when she volunteered to work in Romania.

During my gap year in the summer of 2015, my friend and I spent two weeks volunteering in Romania. Aged eighteen and with a strong interest in helping vulnerable children, we googled “volunteering in Romania”. We soon made contact with an organisation which advertised itself as “working with underprivileged kids”. Almost immediately we had found our volunteer placement.

The promotional video focussed on the feelings of the volunteers and how amazing and grateful the children were. The couple who ran the programme interviewed us by Skype. However, we were not asked if we had any teaching experience or childcare qualifications. The organisation did ask for a criminal background check, our health background, and informed us of basic health and safety conditions.

The cost of the two-week stay – £600 – was broken down into a long list of general items, including the opportunity to work with “qualified teachers”. We soon found out that this was just one of many false promises.

Volunteering

We arrived in Romania only to realise that what we were actually providing was a free English summer school to the local children of the town and even some adults. After the initial few days, the programme leader would leave the school for long periods of time, leaving us, young volunteers with no teaching experience, in charge of up to fifty children.

What made matters worse, at the time the school was under construction. There was dangerous building material which the children took great delight in playing with. I raised these concerns with the couple who ran the programme, but no action was taken.

Helping children?

I remember vividly three brothers arriving at school with dirty clothes and eating breakfast in the classroom. Later I was told that this would constitute the boys' only reliable meal for the day. The boys had crooked, tiny and underdeveloped teeth—and appeared to be stunted in growth as compared to other children in the classroom.

Concerned for the boys' welfare, I inquired about this family to the couple. The woman informed me they lived in the 'shanty town' on the edge of the city, that there was nothing anyone could do to help them – this was the so-called 'reality' of Romania. I asked her about social services, but she maintained that many social-care functions were still taken care of by the wider community.

This answer made me question what this programme was for if it wasn't for the benefit of helping children in need.

Lingering thoughts

After a few days, it became clear that we had been completely scammed. When we added up the real cost of hosting the volunteers (price of fuel, school supplies, food) it was far less than the fee we had paid. I had the feeling that the couple who ran the programme were living off the money paid by volunteers.

It was clear my two-week stay had little or no lasting impact on the children or the most vulnerable in that community. I felt cheated. I felt I had been taken

advantage of because of my young age and passion to do good work for vulnerable children.



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<http://www.stahili.org/false-promises-voluntourism/>

The problem with ‘voluntourism’

Before my trip, I thought I would be doing something that would genuinely benefit the community. But I was being lured and manipulated. As a young person without teaching experience and childcare qualifications, I was unprepared for the experience and should not have been left alone unsupervised with children.

The crux of voluntourism is that it benefits the volunteer and not necessarily the people who need help. I expected to leave with an ‘altruistic-afterglow’, a feeling that I had done good work and I could pat myself on the back because of it.

But I didn’t. I left with a nasty taste in my mouth, and a nagging voice in my head that my effort and money had been wasted.

My advice to young people? Don’t be lured into these programmes. My experience, along with many other ‘voluntourists’ is that these programmes can easily manipulate young volunteers by the way they present themselves online. The gap year travel industry ought to be held accountable for the experiences it provides, and should not allow unqualified and inexperienced young people to work with children.

Raise money, donate, and volunteer locally, where you can have direct influence and monitor your efforts more easily.

Have you been a voluntourist working with children? Are you willing to share the experience with us? Please contact us at info@stahili.org