



International Volunteering: Trends and Insights

**Better
Care
Network**



**Better
Care
Network
Netherlands**



Hope & Homes for Children



Together, building futures.



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Introduction and limitations

This study is part of a larger project exploring the growing trend in volunteering in care centres for children (please see *Collected Viewpoints on International Volunteering in Residential Care Centres: An overview*, for more information). Between March and June 2014, over 100 individuals were interviewed as part of this project and all were asked to give their perspectives on the volunteer travel industry and volunteer motivations. Individuals interviewed included writers and bloggers, faith organisations working with mission teams, individuals working in the travel and volunteer travel sectors, individuals involved in employee volunteering initiatives in corporate social responsibility departments, academics, educators and trainers, non-governmental organisation (NGO) and international non-governmental organisation (INGO) actors, and volunteers themselves. Their names and organisations are listed at the end of this document.

Some individuals requested that their individual contributions remain anonymous due to the sensitivity of the subject matter. For consistency, all quotations within this study have thus been presented anonymously. For readers wanting further access to the ideas expressed in this piece, please contact the authors directly for details about the sources. In addition to these interviews, this overview has been informed by evidence collected in the related literature reviews, an internet analysis, and survey responses from over 200 volunteers and 28 organisations.

The informants for this wider study suggested that trend for international volunteering in residential care centres for children is, in the main, being fuelled by volunteers from the global north participating in placements in the global south. This report seeks to understand the trends and motivating factors for this type of volunteerism. It does not focus on in-country volunteering or on volunteering abroad between countries in the global north or countries in the global south. It should be noted that international volunteering between countries in the global south is a growing

phenomenon that is deserving of further study, especially in relation to volunteering in residential care centres for children. Additionally, an obvious omission from this study is the volunteerism contributions of Far East nations in the global north, such as Japan and the Republic of Korea.

What is volunteerism?

Motivations for volunteering are exceedingly diverse, as are perspectives of what is entailed in volunteering. This study focuses on the Anglophone understanding of volunteering, but is cognisant of the fact that different countries and cultures may offer differing perspectives. While it was not within the scope of this study to conduct comprehensive research on understandings of volunteerism across languages and cultures, some attempt was made to understand any key differences during the course of informant interviews and surveys. Volunteering was generally understood as something that was “doing good for society”, “helping others”, and “helping out for free”. However, definitions became more nuanced when informants were pressed to describe the nature of possible volunteering activities, how long volunteer placements might last, and whether volunteering happened at home or abroad. For example, Spanish speakers who were consulted for this study understood volunteering as dedicating a few hours of time, on an occasional basis, to support a project. The idea of working numerous, regular hours for no or low pay - whether for a long or short period of time - was not widely understood as “volunteering”. It was seen as “working for free”.

Louis A. Penner (2004) suggests that there are four key elements to volunteerism. Volunteerism is a (1) planned action involving (2) long-term, (3) non-obligated helping within an (4) organisational context. It should be noted that the reference to “long-term” here is intended to disassociate volunteerism from bystander interventions. General understandings of volunteerism, evidenced in the interviews conducted for this study, indicate that, while people accept that volunteerism could represent months or years of work, many others believed it could also be undertaken in short-term placements of a few days or even hours.

Volunteerism abroad

Definitions of volunteer travel vary, but many studies cite Wearing's definition (2001) of volunteer tourists as "those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organised way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments, or research".

The choice to volunteer abroad, as opposed to volunteering in one's home community, is often seen as "giving back" to society or offering assistance to those less fortunate in the global community. Volunteering abroad is not a new phenomenon. Faith-based service missions abroad have been a central feature of religious expression for centuries, and the secular volunteer industry was firmly established over 50 years ago with the launch of national volunteering agencies such as VSO in the UK in 1958, The Peace Corps in the USA 1961, Fredskorpset (Norwegian Peace Corps) in 1963, the Deutscher Entwicklungsdienst (German Development Service founded) in 1963, and Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteering in 1965. UN Volunteers was founded in 1970.

Travel industry experts interviewed for this study were of the general opinion that the boom in the volunteer travel industry began in the early 2000s with the rise of more affordable air travel and the ease of online bookings and connections. Some experts posit that the advancement of social media contributed to a subsequent surge, as the travel experiences of peers is now immediately visible and accessible – something that can be very quickly shared, understood, and replicated. Today a search on *GoAbroad.com* (a content aggregation website for opportunities abroad) alone lists 1,129 organisations that provide international volunteer opportunities. Searches in Spanish and German produced similarly large numbers of opportunities, although often organisations registered in Anglophone countries operate in a variety of languages; for example, Projects Abroad, one of the largest providers, has websites in 14 languages and Volunteering Solutions offers their website content in 5 languages.

The peak in the volunteer travel occurred between 2007 and 2009. Since then, informants suggested that the industry has been static or perhaps in decline. Reasons given for this included: the financial crisis in 2008, the negative press surrounding voluntourism in the European market, and an increase in the cost of university fees. In addition, informants commented on the rise of adventure and experiential travel packages, which now include volunteering within their itineraries. Consequently, volunteering is becoming less of a travel product in its own right and rather is just one component of a broader travel experience. It is worth noting that these are the perceptions of operators in Europe and North America and this study lacks data on the status of volunteer travel in Middle Eastern and Far Eastern markets. China, Korea, and Japan were given as areas where the growth in volunteer travel is still apparent, although this study does not have any evidence to corroborate this.

Globally, there are few comprehensive studies giving data on the actual scale and characteristics of volunteer travel. One of the reasons suggested for this lack of information on the size and shape of the volunteer sector is that volunteerism suffers from a problem of definition. The lines between volunteering, voluntourism, and tourism are very blurred. Volunteer travel is also a diverse, multi-dimensional activity, where people access opportunities from a wide range of service providers – some of whom do not even consider themselves to be formal service providers.

Motivations for volunteering abroad

Giving freely of one's time to promote a social cause is widely encouraged by schools, faith organisations, family, friends, workplaces, the media, and celebrities. Individuals interviewed for this study commented that volunteering is a cultural phenomenon and is now simply expected as part of a socially-conscious life. Interview respondents also noted another, somewhat intangible, motivating

factor for volunteering arising from a need for “meaning” that drives people to seek out human connections and offer their time and skills for causes not dominated by profit.

Importantly, many interview respondents noted the personal nature of volunteering and suggested that the desire to volunteer was often very emotional, rather than practical or logical. While some practical motivations certainly exist (detailed below), individuals are generally seen to have very personal motivations for volunteering, unique to their own life experiences. Other motivations for volunteering include:

Personal growth

“Peace Corps allowed me the space and time to figure out who I really wanted to be and how I wanted to change the world. To say that serving 3 years and 3 months with the Peace Corps changed my life forever would be an understatement.”

Respondents commented that removing oneself from familiar work/school routines and environments, and being confronted with new challenges through volunteering, offered an opportunity to learn more about oneself, one’s relationships, and to shape one’s ambitions for the future. In addition, gaining international experience and volunteer experience was seen as useful for CV-building and university applications for young people. Critical literature on the subject has challenged whether these advantages for the volunteers outweigh the possible benefits for the host communities (Callanan, M. and Thomas, S. 2005, Slimbach, 2013).

Learning and cultural exchange

The opportunity to learn about a different country and culture is considered a key part of the volunteer experience. Over 80% of survey respondents classed this as an “important” or “very important” factor in choosing a volunteer experience. In addition, many survey respondents cited the opportunity for cultural exchange as one of the important positive impacts of international volunteering. The quotations below are just a small selection of a large number of similar responses

to the question “What are some of the positive impacts you think volunteers can have on the people and communities with whom they work?”

- Diversity and meeting new cultures, being exposed to new ideas
- Mutual cultural learning
- Exposure to foreigners and other languages is helpful as we all enter a more global society
- I think it is important for people from around the world to meet each other, work together, and see that they care and think about each other. It helps to form brotherhood and gives us the perspective that we are not alone in this world, and helps us to know that the world does have good people in it
- Inter-cultural friendships make the world a safer place for all.

Giving back

“To give back after having a career and lifestyle in a developed country”

Survey respondent, in answer to the question “What was your motivation for volunteering abroad?”

The notion of “giving back” is woven through the language of volunteering. “Making a difference”, was another also common response to the question of why people volunteer. Some interview respondents regarded the impulse to take action on someone else’s behalf as a positive sign of an increasingly socially aware society. Others felt that it demonstrated a lack of understanding of the notion of privilege and the complexities of a globalised world:

“Often when I asked them why, or who they were giving back to, they didn’t really know how to answer. It’s like they have a sense of social justice but they’re not really sure what to do with it”.

“The thing you imagine could be “given back” is the “lucky draw” of your privilege, and that can’t be given back no matter how hard you try.”

NGO Executive Director

Bearing witness to poverty

Volunteer respondents often quoted that experiencing poverty played an essential part in helping them to gain a deeper understanding of, and commitment to, global issues and social action.

“Volunteers want to work where there’s real poverty. Some of them are even disappointed when they arrive in a country and realise that there are “proper toilets” for example... They have a stereotypical idea of what poverty is”

Executive Director, Volunteer travel agency

Critics of volunteerism suggest that these experiences can come uncomfortably close to poverty tourism. As Ian Birrell reported in his article for the Observer in 2010, “In Asia, unbelievably, tourists pay for trips to hand out food to impoverished rural families. In Africa, tour firms throw in a visit to an orphanage alongside a few days on the beach or watching wild animals.” In a more recent critique, as part of a debate featured in the New York Times in 2014, Rafia Zakaria commented: “The problem with voluntourism is that it treats receiving communities as passive objects of the visiting Westerner’s quest for saviourism. Even more vile is its reliance on poverty as a visible spectacle”. Others argue that such transformative experiences result in volunteers becoming champions for global social justice when they return back home.

Learning and cultural exchange

“I was starting travelling alone and wanted a safety net & to help meet other people to continue travelling with afterwards.”

Survey respondent (aged 18 – 24)

Volunteering as a structured travel experience is often not perceived as a motivating factor by the volunteers themselves, but it is something that is stressed by industry experts as an important factor, especially for students and young people who are planning a travel experience. Signing up to a program that provides in-country contacts and advice and support pre-, during and sometimes post-trip, empowers young people to travel in a way they might not be otherwise

comfortable doing on their own. In addition, working within an organisation, alongside local staff and other international volunteers, provides an immediate social network and a route to access new cultures and experiences.

A desire to help directly

Interview informants commented that criticisms of NGO transparency and overheads had encouraged more donors to focus on finding ways to contribute to causes they cared about without having to donate through a large organisation. In addition, informants believed that nowadays people are more likely to think about visiting a charity overseas to “see where the money goes”.

“There is a level of need in Africa greater than most other parts of the world and I would love the opportunity to help a small local organisation rather than a large international NGO.”

Survey respondent

Some informants viewed this drive to directly engage as an encouraging sign of greater global awareness. However, others found this trend worrying, seeing it as part of a “de-professionalization” of development, with unskilled individuals undertaking roles they are unprepared for. This perspective was articulated especially by some actors in evangelical Christian communities:

“There is a great trend of Christian role models not being equipped to help – and instead being supported by God to achieve what they are trying to do – Moses being a prime example! This is often taken as inspiration for the de-professionalization of development. People feel that they are able to take on tasks that they are not prepared for, with the belief that God will guide them.”

In-country facilitator for a Christian mission organisation

Adventure

The informants who were interviewed expressed the idea that volunteering at home is “less sexy” than volunteering abroad. Volunteering abroad goes hand-in-hand with ideas of adventure,

exploration, and new experiences. It presents a very different volunteer experience; one that can be appealing to those who would not necessarily consider volunteering at home.

Contributing to a social cause

Over 80% of volunteers surveyed responded that working with an organisation that has a clear mission focus and contributing to making a positive societal impact were the most important aspects of volunteering abroad. Conversely, some survey respondents seemed to have a more flexible approach to where they would volunteer and what causes they would be involved with:

“Motivation to leave a positive impact in the world.” “Helping where help is needed.”

“I just wanted to help.”

Comments from survey respondents in answer to the question “What was your motivation for volunteering abroad?”

“I would be open to volunteering in any country as long as the organisation’s goals and values are aligned with mine.”

Comment from survey respondent to the question “Why were you interested in volunteering in this area?”

Volunteer populations – characteristics and motivations residential care centres problematic?

There are a variety of different ways for individuals to participate in volunteering abroad. However, there are certain sectors that specifically promote volunteering and facilitate that experience for the volunteer. It is useful to understand how these sectors approach volunteering abroad, their influences on the volunteer, and the

types of experience they facilitate. For the purposes of this study, we have examined the characteristics of approaches to volunteering abroad as organised by faith groups, work places and schools and university groups.

Young people and education

Many of the interview informants based in countries in the Global South, who see high volumes of international volunteers, identified that volunteers are mainly young people (under 25), and often university students. While there is no data to support this, the general perception of experts interviewed for this study was that this group was one of the largest “volunteer abroad” populations.

In North America the concept of volunteering, or “service”, is directly linked to academic credit in many schools and universities, with young people obliged to complete around 30 days of service each year at home or abroad. Most schools and universities have well-developed service-learning initiatives and, while there is a focus on local community participation, such programs often include overseas trip

Example: University at Albany, State University of New York (SUNY)

SUNY partners with Global Service Corps (GSC) to offer a range of credit summer programs in Cambodia and Tanzania. The following details are excerpts from the partnership program available on the GSC website:

Program Requirements and Credit

Built on GSC’s successful service-learning study abroad programs in Tanzania, GSC and University at Albany, State University of New York (SUNY) are now jointly offering a nine-credit Summer Program in Cambodia. During the GSC Cambodia Program, students will gain hands-on community service project experience while living and working with the local people, in and around the capital city of Phnom Penh.

All students will begin their programs together

during a one-week cultural orientation and training to acquaint them with the culture and history of Cambodia and prepare them for their project placements. Basic, conversational Khmer lessons will also be included during orientation. Students will keep blogs and/or journals during the program and submit a final paper that will be reviewed by SUNY-Albany for grading. The GSC in-country coordinator will be in contact weekly and meet with the students at least once every three weeks to provide further information, support and assistance. Students successfully completing the course will receive nine college credits from University at Albany, New York.

Sample program

GSC HIV/AIDS Prevention & Public Health Program

Participants in the HIV/AIDS Prevention & Public Health Program will share their talents, experience and knowledge with teachers, students and community members in Phnom Penh. They will lead health workshops with the help of local translators and GSC provided materials and lesson plans. During the Health Education. Workshops and follow up activities, volunteers will cover HIV/AIDS education and prevention, drug and alcohol abuse awareness, hygiene, domestic violence and other public health issues.

Program Fee:

\$6,130 estimated Included:

Nine college credits from SUNY Albany

All in-country student expenses: Airport pick-up/return and project transportation; hotel, orphanage, and monastery accommodations; all meals at accommodations or local restaurants; language and cultural orientation and training; project administration; Sihanoukville beach weekend

Not included:

Airfare, travel insurance, visa, and mandatory background checks; required or optional reading material

There is a significant amount of academic literature available on the subject of service-learning, covering areas such as learning outcomes, impact on receiving communities, program-planning and challenges. While some of this has been referenced in the literature review for this study, a more comprehensive resource is the website of Global Service-Learning Pedagogy and Partnership (www.globalsl.org) which catalogues a bibliography of relevant books, chapters, theses and peer-reviewed articles.

Outside of the USA, a similar, if not greater, emphasis on service is also apparent in the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum taught at most international schools. The “Creativity, Action, Service” component, described as being “at the heart of the IB curriculum” includes “an unpaid and voluntary exchange that has a learning benefit for the student.”

In Europe, “service-learning” is less prevalent (outside of the IB system), and such trips and placements, linked to any kind of academic credit, are uncommon. Despite this, European informants still saw overseas volunteering as an unspoken “rite of passage” for young people.

Young people can access volunteer abroad trips in a variety of ways and many arrange their trips independently through online research and booking, or recommendations from peers. Some, however, do access it as part of their course, organised by the school, or may be linked to NGOs and volunteer agencies through their school’s career and outreach departments. Some interview respondents commented that, at a high school level, volunteer interactions abroad are often influenced by the personal interests and connections of a motivated teacher. In general, education experts commented that, within schools and universities, there is a lack of information, education, guidance, preparation, and debriefing for students.

“The idea is that you do the service, and then there is an education debriefing component – but that’s where the system is weak, nobody is really looking at it with a critical eye and properly debriefing.”

University Professor from the USA

“The biggest barrier is that schools aren’t willing, or don’t have the resources to work

harder to find better alternatives.”

Outreach Director, Canada

Perceptions about volunteering abroad from students themselves were not collected for this study. However, interview informants who had worked with student volunteers offered their impressions of the student volunteer experience:

“A lot of the volunteers were just out of high school. No skills – however they all recognised that they had no skills. They mostly wanted to discover a new country or culture. No-one ever tells them that no skills is a problem – not their family, the organisation they go with, or the local organisations. EVERYONE is praising them for what they’re doing.”

Filmmaker

“There is very much the attitude from young Brits that because of their education and wealth that “obviously we’ll be able to do some good” – and that they will be better at doing things than the local people. There is an attitude of entitlement and privilege that students are saturated with.”

Student volunteer trainer, UK

Interview informants spoke of the pressure on young people to gain experience by volunteering abroad for CV points, professional experience and personal development. This sentiment was common among the spectrum of informants and survey respondents, regardless of their country of origin.

“It doesn’t seem enough to have top grades, play instruments, and be good at sports anymore. You also have to go and save a child in Africa. That’s what it feels like.”

Recent graduate in the USA

The link to professional development is apparent, not just at high school and undergraduate level, but also within post-graduate programs across a wide range of subjects. One interview respondent postured that, as professional internships have become less available and affordable, volunteering is a cheaper and more adventurous way to gain valuable experiences.

While volunteering abroad for professional development was emphasised by interview respondents, this conflicts with the responses

from volunteer surveys. In 2013, GoOverseas conducted a study of over 2,000 young people on motivations behind volunteering abroad. This research indicated that the greatest motivation for volunteering was the opportunity to make a difference (53%), followed by a desire for cultural immersion and travel (29%), with personal growth and professional development at 10% and 8% respectively.

This study acknowledges the need for a comprehensive examination of how volunteering abroad is managed by schools and universities. It would be useful to understand how different approaches may be more or less beneficial for the students and receiving communities involved, and where there are opportunities for more fruitful partnership development with NGOs and businesses.

Employee volunteering

Incentivising of volunteering is not only apparent in schools and universities but also in the workplace. Cited as being driven both by employees looking for a way to “give back” and employers determined to demonstrate their commitment to community and sustainability, all reputable corporate social responsibility departments feature employee volunteering. In many countries there are also tax incentives for making donations to charity and accruing volunteer hours.

Global companies mobilise huge numbers of people to participate in volunteering projects. One of the companies interviewed estimated an in-kind contribution through employee volunteer hours of 13 million GBP in 2013. Another company interviewed reported that on average 45,000 of their employees were engaged in some kind of volunteering each year. Yet another quoted 100,000 employees volunteering over 200,000 hours in over 1700 projects.

In 2007, FSG Social Advisors, in association with Pfizer and The Brookings Institution, published *Volunteering for Impact – Best Practices in International Volunteering. Global Companies Volunteering Globally was produced by IAVE in 2011, and Kenn Allen’s The Big Tent: Corporate Volunteering in the*

Global Age was released in 2013. These three studies provide a comprehensive overview of corporate volunteering, detailing the history of the practice, relevant literature, offering examples of inspiring practices in different global locations, and profiling a range of different organisations and their employee volunteering activities.

For the purposes of this report, it is helpful to divide employee volunteering into two categories – employee selected volunteering and company selected volunteering.

Employee-selected volunteering

In this type of volunteering, companies allocate a certain number of days per year (anywhere from 2 to 19) for their employees to volunteer at a project of their choice. This is sometimes paid leave, sometimes unpaid leave, and some companies encourage employees to volunteer outside of working hours. Companies expressed varying degrees of regulation of these activities. Such volunteering is included in the “donated hours” by the company. Some companies encourage employees to choose projects that are aligned with the company’s philanthropic priorities, but they commented that this was often interpreted creatively by employees, and employees may still volunteer in their own personal choice of project regardless. Some companies have guidelines for the types of organisations with whom their employees can work (for example, registered charities, non-evangelical, non-political, non-discriminatory) and ensure that line-managers approve volunteering requests in advance. In addition, those companies belonging to the London Benchmarking Group must guarantee that their employee volunteering “counts” and so are necessarily more thorough in monitoring the organisations in which employees work and their activities.

In the majority of cases, volunteer experiences were conducted locally. In some instances, employees who were already making personal volunteer-abroad trips would sometimes request to count that time as part of their employee-volunteer hours, but this was said to be uncommon.

Company-selected volunteering

It is becoming more common for larger companies to develop strategic philanthropic partnerships, through which they facilitate

more sophisticated employee volunteering activities. Some organisations only develop partnerships with those NGOs who can actively host their volunteers. Others seek to find ways in which both the company and NGO can benefit from skills transfer and resource support.

Initiatives range in sophistication. At the very basic level, this kind of volunteering can involve something simple, such as sending one or two volunteers to help with an NGO’s IT system. At the other end of the spectrum, it can involve the development of programs alongside NGOs, with employees at the heart of program delivery. It is worth noting that informants stated that this kind of volunteering was mainly implemented on a local and national level. Some stated that they had a policy of only facilitating local/national volunteering.

We prefer to focus on the areas we are having the biggest impact, those areas we are closest to, and where we can be most engaged with local stakeholders.

- Head of Corporate Responsibility.

When companies referenced international volunteering, it was mainly in relation to “team” volunteering, in which groups of employees from a particular part of the business would travel abroad together. While some informants thought this to be a common practice, it was not discussed widely during interviews. Some global companies do implement cross-border volunteering and have sophisticated strategic partnerships in place. Informants noted especially IBM, Pfizer, Google, PepsiCo as being leaders in this arena. Often these projects were not necessarily considered as “volunteering”, even though employees may effectively be volunteering their time:

“They [these companies] would never use the word voluntourism. Tourism is not really a part of it. It’s a development partnership. They are contributing positively to address a real problem.”

CSR advisor

Interview informants commented that employee volunteering was a key way to enhance and encourage engagement and loyalty among their employees. One company highlighted a

survey of their employees in which many said that their proudest moments of their work were actually not attached to their job but to their experiences of employee volunteering. Other companies, however, commented that persuading employees to sign up for volunteer experiences could be challenging and that they were constantly struggling to reach targets of “volunteer hours donated” throughout the year.

Example: Deutsche Post DHL

Our corporate citizenship activities are designed for effective, long-term impact, and are an integral part of our Corporate Strategy. Through our GoTeach program, we help achieve long-term improvements in educational opportunity and employability for young people worldwide. With GoHelp, we help advance disaster management practices at airports in disaster-prone regions. We also provide support to local environmental protection and community service projects initiated by our employees.

We rely on our employees, who dedicate their time and expertise, and collaborate with established partner organisations to carry out these core activities, allowing us to maximise their impact. At the same time, our corporate citizenship activities also help create sustainable business success for our company.

Deutsche Post DHL website – Corporate Responsibility

<http://cr-report2013.dpdhl.com/business-society/corporate-citizenship/>

DHL does not have a top-down organised volunteering policy or framework. However, through their three focus areas, they have developed strategic partnerships with key organisations, and offer a variety of ways in which employees can engage with supporting social causes.

- 1) Expert volunteering. For example, Deutsche Post DHL works with the UN in the field of disaster response (DRT) and preparedness (GARD). Around 400 senior-level employees are trained to be deployed in case of a disaster.
- 2) Working with strategic partners. For example,

national and local offices partner with SOS Children’s Villages to develop employability and work experience opportunities for young people in SOS Children’s Villages.

- 3) Global Volunteering Day. This is an opportunity for all employees to volunteer for their chosen organisation for 1 - 2 days. Employees are encouraged to choose an organisation that reflects their sustainability priorities.

Deutsche Post DHL see the benefit in combining a global, strategic approach to volunteering with more local, self-motivated options.

“When you have choice how to spend your time volunteering, the motivation is stronger than when imposed top-down”

Christoph Selig, Head of GoTeach Team Corporate Communications and Responsibility

Deutsche Post DHL in general does not encourage cross-border volunteering. For some of expert volunteering, travel may be necessary, but that tends to be an exception. They prefer local offices to be connecting with their local community where possible.

Faith communities

Faith communities don’t tend to refer to ‘volunteering’, but see activities in the service of others as an extension of their beliefs and a key part of participating in a faith community.

“Volunteering is how churches approach missions. It’s important for people to touch and feel and experience service. It’s a very different level of expectation to secular donors.”

Development worker in a Christian-orientated organisation

This study specifically focuses on motivations and activities arising from within the Christian community. The main reasons for this are:

- Information from expert interviews noted the strong involvement of Christian groups from the global north in missions in the global south
- A lack of access to data and research on activities stemming from other religions

in regards to volunteerism and mission

The authors acknowledge this limitation and recommend further study on how different religions relate to the concept of volunteering, especially that which involves travel to other countries.

The Journeys of Faith publication from the Faith to Action Initiative suggests that churches in the United States spend \$1.6 billion each year on short-term mission trips. The same publication noted: “Most churches already have some type of global partnership through traditional missionary support or Christian charities.” Overseas Christian missions have been a significant part of the history and literature of the faith. It is not a modern phenomenon.

The history of short-term missions is similar to that of secular volunteering. Operation Mobilisation (OM) began in the late 1950s and Youth With a Mission in 1960, around the same time as international volunteering organisations were being initiated around the world. More recently, the growth of the internet and cheap air travel has led to the development of the short-term overseas mission sector. In his 2012 book *Short-Term Mission*, Brian M. Howell states, “Over the past few decades, short-term mission trips have exploded in popularity. With easy access to affordable air travel, millions of American Christians have journeyed internationally for ministry, service and evangelism.”

It is easy to conflate evangelical missions and service missions, and often the two are closely linked or form part of the same initiative. However, some missions are purely evangelical (“church planting”) while others are service-orientated, seeking to practically role-model Christian values and beliefs.

Mission trips can be organised by individual churches or Christian-orientated mission organisations and will sometimes be funded by the church community as a whole, with less of an onus on the individual to fund themselves. Some organisations work with volunteers before their trip in order to prepare them for their experience. Informants noted that these trainings

would often be focused on helping volunteers understand how to share their faith. However, practical considerations such as language, logistics, and cultural awareness were also mentioned.

For Christians, reasons for volunteering abroad are motivated by a sense of vocation or ‘calling’ from God. Answering the question “Why were you interested in volunteering in this area?”, survey responses included:

“God has called us to Ethiopia.” ...

“It is where God opened the doors.” ...

“I would go anywhere God called me.”

Example: Saddleback Church HIV/AIDS Initiative

Saddleback Church is an evangelical Christian “megachurch” founded in California 33 years ago by Pastor Rick Warren. Saddleback has a range of highly developed local and international community engagement projects. Their HIV/AIDS initiative is one of these:

The backbone of the Global HIV&AIDS Initiative is the PEACE Plan – a plan to mobilize ordinary believers in churches to engage global problems through local congregations – and the CHURCH strategy – a six-step approach to caring for people living with HIV&AIDS to bring compassion, community and real solutions.

Through the Peace Plan, churches are linked to other churches around the globe to learn about HIV and to launch programs which care for people in the community. This strategy’s success is measured by how many ordinary people in a local church are engaged in knowing about HIV, caring for people living with HIV, and participating in actions that can end the AIDS pandemic. By the end of 2011, 194 countries had been visited by PEACE teams from Saddleback Church. Each team received special training on how to help a [local] church launch an HIV ministry in their own community.”

HIV /AIDS Initiative, Saddleback Church, How We Do it

There is an application process and extensive training for those wishing to volunteer internationally as part of a Saddleback team. Participation is self-funded and costs vary according to the time of year. Most trips last 14 days.

Have a heart for the orphan, the sick, those infected and affected by HIV? www.thepeaceplan.com is the place to get connected. Whether you are a concerned individual, or if you are part of a group, there is an opportunity for you. Professionals (nurses, physicians, social workers, etc.) can put their skills and knowledge to work for PEACE, but even those without the professional background can help the sick and the orphan!

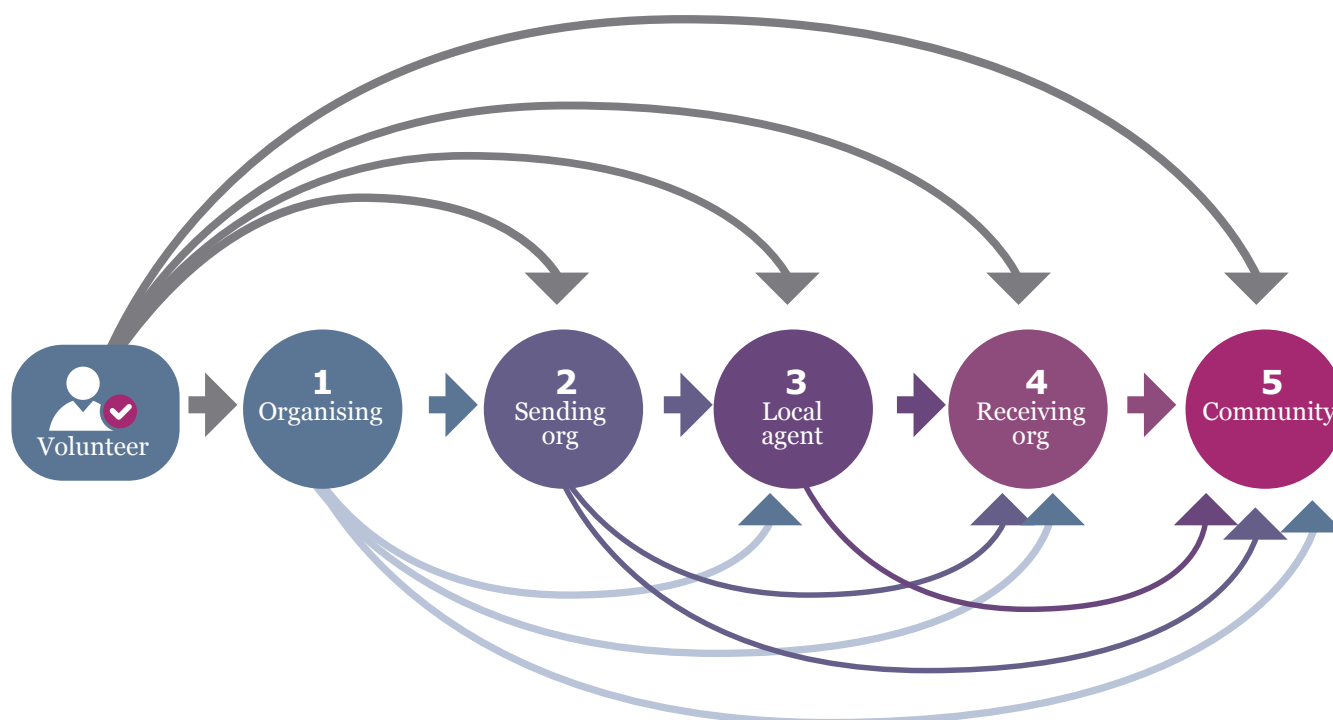
HIV /AIDS Initiative, Saddleback Church, Go on a peace trip

There are numerous ways in which a group, or an individual, can arrange a volunteering trip abroad. Fig. 1 seeks to demonstrate the different organisations that a volunteer may associate with on their journey to working with a local community overseas. Regardless of whether they are volunteering through a church, school, company, or undertaking an individual trip, volunteers might think that by signing up for a volunteer placement that they are merely one or two steps removed from the people they seek to help. The reality is that a volunteer can be up to 5 steps removed from that community.

Fig. 1. Possible steps between volunteer and volunteer actors, and the community they are hoping to support

For example: an individual learns about volunteering through their school (their organising community) and sees an advertisement for a particular volunteering agency (the sending agency). The volunteer agency works with a local agent who recommends sending volunteers to a particular NGO (the receiving organisation). That receiving organisation is the one who holds the relationship with the local community through specific projects.

How volunteering abroad is facilitated



1. Organising community i.e. employer, faith group, school / university, interest group
2. Sending agency i.e. corporate volunteer specialists, volunteer travel agencies, faith-based mission agencies
3. Local agent i.e. individual fixer, local faith group, local NGO acting as adviser. Can be local person / organisation or international person / organisation based in-country.
4. *Receiving organisation* i.e. NGO, INGO, faith group, development project
5. *Community* i.e. the people that the volunteer is ultimately hoping to support

It is also possible for the volunteer to enter this chain of contact at different place – for example, a volunteer looking for a more authentic travel experience may and try and connect directly with a community during their trip. In addition, there are numerous ways in which volunteer actors can facilitate the experience for prospective volunteers. For example, it is possible that a school or faith group in a sending country (i.e. the organising community) might have a direct relationship with a related school or faith group in a receiving country (i.e. the receiving organisation), so volunteers are placed to work in that area, circumnavigating the need for a formal agency or in-country fixer.

Challenges inherent with working with international volunteers

There is a wealth of available literature discussing the positive and negative impacts of volunteering in terms of receiving communities, NGOs, and the volunteers themselves. However, there is very little information actually from the perspective of receiving communities and receiving organisations about the perceived benefits of volunteers. What research is available seems to paint a very positive picture of volunteering interactions. Barnhart (2012) surveyed almost 250 organisations in over

50 countries and found that “Overall, respondents appeared to be overwhelmingly positive regarding the benefits of hosting international volunteers.”

As this project seeks to understand how to improve volunteering efforts, less time was spent encouraging informants to evaluate the positive impacts and successes they had achieved in working with volunteers. Rather, respondents were asked to consider the main challenges they faced with volunteers, and barriers that they found to improving interactions for all stakeholders. It is worth noting the one-sided nature of this query and reminding the reader that it does not represent a holistic critique of volunteering.

Volunteer expectations

Nearly all interviewees commented at length on the problem of volunteer expectations. The most significant issue was around volunteers having high expectations of what they were capable of achieving in a short time frame.

The assumption that you can arrive and be useful when going abroad is extraordinary. It is important for people to realise that they can't change anyone's life in a week.

Founder, Travel abroad organisation

These opinions were particularly expressed by those organisations involved in pre-departure training for volunteers. In addition, some informants commented on volunteer's skewed perception of the countries and communities they would be visiting.

Stereotyped images of poverty and the “developing world”, as well as high expectations of their own potential for influence, were all seen as barriers to volunteers having a positive, impacting experience. Informants felt that the organising and sending organisations were largely responsible for creating these expectations in volunteers.

“How media and the church have displayed poverty has really created the western hero complex.”

Founder, Short-term mission organisation

Several actors in the faith-based communities

placed responsibility on churches for sensationalising the language of missions. Many actors in the media held their own sector responsible for uncritical hero-worship of celebrity do-gooders and stories of “helping”. Those in volunteer travel saw similar problems in volunteer placement marketing (“anyone can do it!”). It was interesting to see that many actors took ownership of the problem within their own sector, rather than suggesting that responsibility for those messages lay elsewhere.

Volunteer expectations

Doing good is a whole lot more difficult that you ever imagined.”

Executive Director, Microenterprise Development organisation

Informants acknowledged the problem of volunteers having very limited knowledge of the country and the specific challenges of the community they were visiting.

Many companies are looking to engage their staff in ways they think have an impact. They often don't realise it doesn't. They don't understand the bigger issues because no- one has explained it to them.

CSR Consultancy

Informants commented on the fact that it is difficult to effectively communicate the complexity of local development issues in an accessible manner. Informants involved in educating volunteers found it difficult to encourage students to engage in programs that focused more on the need for education and less on adventure.

“The most startling thought for students is the risks involved for them, and for the local community. They haven't thought about that at all, and really haven't thought about the complexities of what they're about to go and do.”

Volunteer trainer

This can create problems for the receiving organisation, as a lack of understanding can result in inappropriate, or ineffective actions by the volunteer, or mean that the receiving

organisation must invest time and energy in extensive training and orientation.

Imbalance of power

“Volunteering is problematic any place where there is an imbalance of power – and that is virtually all places.”

Founder, Development website

A common concern among informants was that the very nature of volunteering immediately created an imbalance of power between the volunteer and the receiving organisation or community. Feeding into the discourse on aid dependency, and participatory development, this concern suggests that partnerships are always affected by the economic disparities between parties, thereby creating a situation in which the volunteer holds the power, even if they do not realise it.

“You are rich enough to do something for free – and they are poor enough that they can't pay the staff they need.”

Volunteer tourist

“Being a white guy in Africa, your naïve assumptions aren't challenged in the way they would be back home. You're living in a world with very few checks and balances.”

Founder, Experiential education organisation

These concerns illustrate that the imbalance of power could result in volunteers undertaking activities that were, at best, inappropriate or not useful to the receiving organisation or, at worst, harmful.

Limitations of receiving organisations

Interviewed receiving organisations commented on the constraints in effectively managing volunteers when their resources were already stretched. Orientation and training was sometimes seen as a drain on organisations and hosting many short-term volunteers exacerbated this problem. This concern was noted not just by receiving organisations, but also by sending organisations, especially those working in the corporate sector.

Our biggest concern is how much time it takes to effectively manage volunteers... They [the volunteers] create extra work for the charity.

Corporate Citizenship department

Some respondents saw this as a missed opportunity for NGOs and they felt that, with more planning and management, they could turn the opportunity for hosting volunteers into something more useful for their organisation. Informants also noted that NGOs struggled to identify their needs and to think creatively about how they could engage a wider audience with their beneficiaries.

Who benefits?

Critics of international volunteering suggest that experiences are more beneficial to the volunteers than to the receiving organisations or communities. This feeling was articulated by some respondents, especially those within the corporate sector. In addition, corporate actors were conscious of their limitations in understanding and reporting their volunteer's impact. In general, companies measure "donated hours" rather than trying to understand what change their employees may have made through their volunteering.

"They measure inputs because they cannot measure the outputs. In addition, banks respond well to numbers, and not as well to qualitative data."

CSR Manager

Encouraging a critical perspective

"There was no real appetite for critical reflection – any analysis was more about increasing number of participants and doing it more cost effectively."

Former CSR manager

Throughout all sectors, there was agreement from respondents on the need for critical reflection and the difficulty in encouraging it. Within the corporate sector, organisations place the burden of responsibility on the NGO in ensuring effectiveness and impact, rather than on the company to encourage its employees to engage in

reflection and review. In addition, it was seen as not being within a company's business interests to interrogate partners about their effectiveness.

In faith communities, one respondent commented on the need for helping people to separate their mission from their methodology. Those who felt 'called' to serve could be defensive about critical reflection as they saw it as a direct challenge to their beliefs. However, when encouraged to think about how they were responding, rather than why, conversations progressed much more easily.

One particular barrier that many informants highlighted was that good intentions are still seen as enough. People assume that volunteering is always good and impactful, and consequently critical reflection is not a natural part of the experience. In addition, volunteering and charitable causes are often deeply personal. Respondents from the corporate sector noted that often partnerships are driven by personal affiliations and connections of staff members (including senior staff members) which made problems much more difficult to address in a dispassionate manner.

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Skills mis-match

“Often people volunteering are square pegs in round holes. We get people who are willing as opposed to people who are skilled.”

NGO Manager

While informants referred to the importance of skills-matching to ensure more effective volunteering, there was also significant discussion about the difficulty of that process.

“It’s important to remember that experience in developed countries does not translate to developing world countries.”

University Professor

Many informants also commented on the difficulties working with un-skilled volunteers. Organisations found that working with unskilled volunteers could take a lot of management and training. Experts also expressed concerns that often unskilled, or non-relevantly skilled were allowed to work in settings in which they were unqualified – for example medical students practicing procedures, or people working directly with vulnerable children or adults. This concern is consistent with existing research in this area, for example McLennan (2014) Medical Voluntourism in Honduras, Radecke, M. W. (2010) Misguided

missions, and Callanan, M. and Thomas, S. (2005) Volunteer tourism: Deconstructing volunteer activities within a dynamic environment.

Limitations of sending organisations

Informants working with large international or global companies noted that they did not have the time or resources to conduct rigorous due diligence on employee volunteering. This was also the case for some volunteer travel agencies consulted. When managing partnerships with numerous organisations around the world, it is very challenging find to vet and check every organisation. Companies do not have the time to visit organisations and often have to rely on written reports and conference calls. This limitation was also noted by those working within school settings; as often schools and teachers had limited time and resources to spend on examining volunteering projects alongside developing curricula and activities.

“Controlling the message”

Within the religious, educational, and corporate sectors, interviewees talked about the need by the sending organisation to “control the message” and ensure that volunteer activities were furthering the company, church, or school message. Concerns from informants about this centred on the idea that the sending organisation priorities would take priority over those of the receiving organisation or community.

“It was more about employee branding than about having an impact – but nobody would really articulate that within the organisation.”

Former CSR Manager

Volunteer enjoyment

Interview respondents acknowledged the need for volunteers to be satisfied with the activities they were performing. Some employee volunteers could feel under-utilised by a partner organisation;

others became bored of returning to similar types of placement time after time. Organisations facilitating volunteer experiences commented on the pressure, both on themselves and on receiving organisations, to ensure there were enough appropriate activities to keep volunteers busy.

Taking it home

Those actors engaged in volunteering as a learning experience found there to be little emphasis in the industry on what happens when a volunteer returns home. This was seen not only as a missed learning opportunity but also as contributing to the de-politicisation of global issues. One respondent commented that short-term volunteer experiences encouraged individuals only to think about global concerns, such as poverty and disease, as part of their adventure abroad, rather than being issues related to the choices they made in their everyday lives at home.

“They won’t engage with the global issues that keep the countries in the situation they’re in.”

Human Rights activist and author

Final thoughts

Volunteering is an industry, a calling, a vocation, a rite of passage, an adventure, an opportunity, an education. This study has shown the diversity of the volunteer experience, and the wide range of actors involved. While this has been seen as a barrier to promoting best practice in volunteering by some informants, others saw the sheer scale of the practice of volunteering as a critical opportunity to effect change for social good. If the conversation can be focused on “how” people volunteer, or facilitate volunteering experiences, rather than challenging “what” type of experiences they are involved in, or “why” they are doing it, stakeholders may be better placed to leverage these good intentions for sustainable, positive impact.

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