

Rethinking the true impact of voluntourism  
in line with new community development  
standards

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This publication may be cited as: Parkes, E. (2018). Rethinking  
the true impact of voluntourism in line with new community  
development standards, *Whanake: The Pacific Journal of  
Community Development*, 4(2), 90–101.

Founded at Unitec Institute of Technology in 2015

An ePress publication

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# Rethinking the true impact of voluntourism in line with new community development standards

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## Abstract

The volunteer tourism market now represents over \$2 billion annually but its impact is not yet adequately understood. Studies that have considered the impacts of voluntourism on host communities have had some significant limitations as well as very having mixed findings, highlighting both the potential benefits but also the costs of this increasingly popular form of travel. Voluntourism is now the fastest growing market in the tourism industry and it is essential we consider it critically to ascertain which voluntourism models are contributing to an outmoded north-south approach to development, and which are designed to support the capacity of local organisations. This paper will argue that with the recent publication of the IACD's *Towards shared international standards for community development practice* document the time is right for a renewed and focused attempt to measure the impacts of volunteering and voluntourism on community development.

## Introduction

Volunteer tourism or 'voluntourism' is most commonly defined as travel with the purpose of engaging in organised volunteer work to positively impact both the host community and the guest (Wearing, 2001). The volunteer tourism market now represents over \$2 billion annually (Biddle, 2016) but its impact is not yet adequately understood (Hernandez-Maskivker et al., 2018; Lupoli &

Morse, 2015).

A voluntourism experience is usually for up to three months and involves activities intended to aid the community, such as through alleviating material poverty, conducting research, teaching or preserving a particular environment (Wearing, 2001). This is differentiated from the broader term 'volunteering', which does not necessarily include a travel aspect, does not imply a length of time and does not usually require payment by participants. Voluntourism is differentiated from other forms of 'alternative tourism' that do not seek mutual benefits for the unpaid visitor and the host community.

Research into volunteer tourism has largely focused on the travelling participants, with less attention given to measuring the outcomes and long-term impacts of volunteer-based projects on host communities. Studies that have considered the impacts of voluntourism on host communities have had mixed findings, highlighting both the potential benefits but also the costs of this increasingly popular form of travel. Much of the research conducted has had significant limitations, such as failing to include the input of the host community (Fee & Mdee, 2011; Lyons, Hanley, Wearing, & Neil, 2012; Lupoli & Morse, 2015).

Voluntourism is now the fastest growing market in the tourism industry (Lupoli, 2014; Lupoli, Morse, Bailey, & Schelhas, 2014) and it is essential we consider it critically to ascertain which voluntourism models are contributing to an outmoded north-south approach to development (the 'undeveloped' global south supposedly needing the aid and advice of the 'developed' global north), and which are designed to support the capacity of local organisations.

This paper will argue that with the recent publication of the *Towards shared international standards for community development practice* document (IACD, 2018) the time is right for a renewed and focused attempt to measure the impacts of volunteering and voluntourism on community development. By developing standards and indicators for good volunteering practice which closely align to *Towards shared international standards for community development practice* (TSISCDP), we will be in a better position to establish whether there is a place for short-term volunteering and voluntourism in community development.



Young people pay to volunteer for a minimum of a week at this elephant rescue operation in Northern Thailand. Volunteer activities are focused around feeding the elephants and improving the site. Volunteers are well supervised, educated on the wider issues and encouraged to become ambassadors for elephant welfare when they return home.



Building houses remains a common voluntourism activity, with wide variations in approach depending on the organisation. Here, volunteers in Cambodia rebuild a family home alongside local builders, with materials largely funded by the volunteers.

## Time to question voluntourism

Critics of voluntourism point out that it often focuses on a single project or issue without consideration of the interconnectedness of development issues and their underlying causes (Hernandez-Maskivker et al., 2018). Voluntourism is often organised by tourist operations that may not be equipped to set up sustainable community-development projects (Birrell, 2010). Participants believe themselves to be helping but may contribute to a system that neglects the real needs of a community, particularly when volunteer needs are prioritised (Lupoli, 2013). Their presence can contribute to job creation but can also drive up unemployment in the long run, and may disrupt the local economy if its focus shifts to attracting volunteer tourists (Loiseau et al., 2016).

The quality of work done by voluntourists is variable, sometimes being of a high standard but at times needing to be redone by locals after the volunteer tourists have left. In a few documented cases work is redone unnecessarily because a dependency has been created on the volunteers, and constant work for volunteers is needed for the community to continue to receive the economic benefits they bring (Lupoli, 2013). Examples of this dependency and the “dark side of volunteer tourism” (MacKinnon, 2009, p. 1) include practices such as remuddying walls of community buildings, ready for the next round of volunteers, after the volunteer painters have returned home, or placing children in orphanages to meet voluntourism demand.

As with other types of tourism, voluntourism that might have a neutral or even beneficial impact when done on a small scale can have a range of unintended consequences when the number of people involved becomes too high. These numbers put stress on scarce resources such as drinkable water, food and energy. There is a tipping point at which the constant presence of volunteers from large-scale voluntourism operations can negatively affect local customs and values, can introduce antisocial or destructive habits, and can impact sacred places and natural environments (Hernandez-Maskivker et al., 2018).

Young people have a variety of motivations to engage in this type of alternative tourism. A few studies highlight the self-serving agendas of some volunteer tourists, especially around personal ego enhancement and a need for recognition (Mustonen, 2007; Hernandez-Maskivker et al., 2018), but oftentimes this volunteering stems from a genuine desire to contribute to a community. While ostensibly well intended, this has led to marketing strategies that sell the idea of poor people in undeveloped countries needing the personal help of those in developed countries (Fee & Mdee, 2011). They may need support from developed countries in the form of collective solidarity and changes to practices at home and abroad, but the assumption of personal help from volunteers being beneficial to host communities buys into the north-south development model that, while outmoded in community-development practice, seems to remain widespread in developed countries outside of community-development circles. I have witnessed surprise and anger on the part of young people looking to engage in voluntourism when they find out they need to pay for the opportunity, which does not fit with their understanding that they are the ones providing the service. Communities often

reinforce this idea through shows of gratitude that a well-meaning volunteer is unlikely to question.

## **The 'win-win' theory of voluntourism. Who is really benefiting?**

There is still strong support for the idea that voluntourism can potentially benefit both parties (Fee & Mdee, 2011). Corti et al. (2010), Wearing (2001) and Proyrungroj (2017) maintain that short-term volunteer placements in a different community can contribute to a shift in the volunteer's understanding, growing their world view and leading to much more substantial future contributions on their part. While volunteering, including voluntourism, may well facilitate learning on the part of the participant, little research has been done to measure this learning potential, and it can also lead to greater intolerance, ethnocentrism and feelings of superiority, and can further imbed colonialistic ideas of 'us' and 'them' (Hammersley, 2014).

Voluntourism programmes that do not adhere to good development practice are likely to solidify outdated north-south concepts (Comhlámh & VOSESA, 2013), and while there may be some benefit to the volunteer, projects are at best of neutral value to the host community. If the main benefit is personal growth on the part of the volunteer, then we need to move beyond thinking in terms of the giver and receiver categories of north-south development. Even when the focus is on gaining a mutual sense of global citizenship and fostering understandings between people from different cultures, the benefit is more likely to be greater for the developed country (Haddock & Devereux, 2015). Northern governments have been criticised for exporting the problems they are facing with youth unemployment or, more recently, with youth mental health (Comhlámh & VOSESA, 2013). Once we have acknowledged who really benefits from these exchanges we may at least come to the table with more open and honest agendas.

## **The end of voluntourism?**

Despite the widespread criticism of current voluntourism practices, there is still a strong case to be made for the importance of volunteering. The 2030 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been said to be only achievable "with the active engagement of volunteers", and volunteer groups are now recognised as stakeholders in the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF), which reviews the implementation of the 2015 development agenda (Haddock & Devereux, 2015). Volunteers have the potential to cause great harm, but also could play an important role in implementing the SDGs and "help to localize the new agenda by providing new spaces of interaction between governments and people for concrete and scalable actions" (UNGA, 2014).

Comparatively, volunteering can fill an important need by rounding out the academic education received by those studying community development. The International Association for Community Development has noted that high-level community-development education has become overly theoretical in many institutions. Training in the field is essential for anyone pursuing a career in development practice and is needed to balance in-class learning (IACD, 2018). Volunteer placements or in-field internships can be an effective way of starting to gain practical experience. However, it is important that this field experience is tested with critical practice theory and professional community-development supervision.

Voluntourism is a growing industry and seems unlikely to decline anytime soon, so the case has been made that the focus should be on developing it, and if necessary regulating it, to minimise harm to host communities (Fee & Mdee, 2011). Does acknowledging that the benefit is to the volunteer detract from the volunteer experience? Does admitting that the most important contribution a volunteer tourist makes is not their skills, but their money, mean they learn any less? Voluntourism experiences would need to be marketed differently, but volunteers would learn more in this way than from a programme that falsely congratulates them. To overcome the problems associated with voluntourism, the local perspective needs to be incorporated into any impact assessment (Lupoli & Morse, 2015). A focus on education for volunteers is also needed if the experience is to lead to meaningful relationship-building, understandings of global citizenship and good development outcomes.

## Measuring the impact of volunteering

A number of strategies and tools have been developed to examine and assess volunteer impact, but there are currently few that do this successfully (Lupoli & Morse, 2015). Tools that exist have many strengths but have not been widely adopted – the measures they use vary greatly, and they can be difficult to apply for people who are not specialists in the field (Independent Sector & UN Volunteers, 2001). Such tools include True Impact's *Volunteerism return on investment tracker* (2018); *Measuring the difference volunteers make*, funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1997); and *Measuring volunteering: A practical toolkit*, published by United Nations Volunteers and Independent Sector (2001).

Some tools, such as the Compass of Sustainability developed by the Sustainability Accelerator Network, consider community sustainability and can be applied to voluntourism, but many attempts to measure volunteering gloss over the impact on host communities, are largely anecdotal, or try to consider impact without including the voices of the host community (Benson & Wearing, 2012; Lyons, Hanley, Wearing, & Neil, 2012; Hernandez-Maskivker et al., 2018).

Tools such as True Impact's Volunteerism Return on Investment Tracker will not be considered adequate by many community-development practitioners as the measures used do not align with what is now considered

by the International Association for Community Development to be best practice for community development. *Measuring volunteering: A practical toolkit* aligns more closely to good development practice, but it is highly technical and may not be accessible enough to be of practical use to volunteer-using organisations.

Research does, however, indicate that there is interest among some volunteer tourism organisations in properly measuring the impact of their programmes on host communities (Lupoli, 2015). They just need to be provided with the right tools and incentives to do this. The recent publication of *TSISCDP* indicates that such a tool should soon be developed.



Volunteer interns in Ningbo, China, work with children of all ages to encourage environmentally sustainable behaviours. Children enjoyed the interaction, energy and language opportunities of engaging with volunteers; however, supervision, training and reviews of the overall effectiveness of the programme are lacking.

## Towards Shared International Standards for Community Development Practice

The criticism around voluntourism has surfaced in a multidisciplinary field with wide-ranging understandings of community-development practice. Without a common understanding of best practice it was difficult to measure the impact of volunteering and to know what indicators to use to monitor or regulate it.

Community development has now been defined by the International Association for Community Development as “a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes participative democracy, sustainable development, rights, economic opportunity, equality and social justice, through the organisation, education and empowerment of people within their communities, whether these be of locality, identity or interest, in urban and rural settings” (IACD, 2018, p. 13).

This definition builds on past efforts to come to a common understanding of community development and is already widely implemented (IACD, 2018, p. 11). IACD members collaborated to produce it along with *TSISCDP* so that all stakeholders involved in community development – communities, practitioners, trainers, employers, funders, policy advisers and others – could have a joint understanding of what was meant by the term ‘community development’ (IACD, 2018). The standards were adopted in 2018 after widespread consultation and refinement, and recognise eight common themes across the practice of effective community development. These are:

- Putting values into practice
- Engaging with communities
- Ensuring participatory planning
- Organising for change
- Learning for change
- Promoting diversity and inclusion



- Building leadership and infrastructure
- Developing and improving policy and practice

(IACD, 2018, p. 15)

Now that there is an international standard for community-development practice it is possible to begin applying this to volunteering. An instant shift away from the negative aspects of voluntourism is not possible, but it at least the standards provide a starting point for discussion of what should be measured, and indicators to align with. At a minimum these standards could be applied by voluntourism organisations or individuals to develop reflective self-assessment of their impact. They could also facilitate improved analysis of volunteer contributions and make possible the creation of an international accreditation and certification system for voluntourism organisations.

## Developing an accreditation system for voluntourism organisations

The themes and much of the content outlined in *TSISCDP* could be directly used in future accreditation standards for voluntourism organisations or projects. The second theme of the standards, for example, is around engaging with communities: whether using volunteers, volunteer tourists, paid or unpaid development practitioners, one of the things that a successful community-development project should be able to demonstrate is that the organisation and people involved “understand the social, political, economic, cultural and environmental factors impacting on local communities, particularly marginalised groups” (IACD, 2018, p. 19). The standards also provide a basis for what values should underpin the development projects led by voluntourism organisations.

An accreditation system and appropriate indicators would need to be developed with input from volunteer tourism organisations, as well as community-development practitioners, in order to reach some common priorities. Lupoli and Morse (2015) outline ways in which indicators could be jointly developed, including online questionnaires and exploratory workshops. A co-design process with both stakeholder groups could be run by the IACD or any of its member organisations to jointly develop indicators that fit within the *TSISCDP* recommendations. In their research to determine the effectiveness of the Compass of Sustainability for this purpose, Lupoli & Morse (2015) found that there is interest from volunteer organisations in this type of collaboration. While not a panacea in itself, it would allow for effective leadership and direction for the volunteering community (Haddock & Devereux, 2015).

There are a number of in-country standards for volunteering that could feed into this. *Best practice guidelines for volunteer-involving organisations*, developed by Volunteering New Zealand (2015), has provided some useful tools for improving the effectiveness of local organisations. *National standards for involving volunteers in not-for-profit organisations* was developed by Volunteering Australia (2001), as volunteers made up more than 50 per cent



of the not-for-profit sector workforce. When combined with the IACD's *TSISCDP*, these could provide a good starting point for volunteering standards that could be adopted internationally.

Practitioners stress the importance of the role of managers of international volunteering organisations in instigating a shift towards this type of good development practice (Hernandez-Maskivker et al., 2018). Managers of volunteering projects need to be aware of these standards, and their organisations's activities need to be measured against them. If volunteers are carefully matched to community-development projects then they will be more likely to have the required skills for the activities they undertake. Skills matching is hugely important, as the myth that somehow volunteers can make a positive difference irrespective of their skills is considered one of the most problematic and dominant aspects of voluntourism (Fee & Mdee, 2011).

Volunteers will need closer management and critical supervision, with more resources put into volunteer education alongside their on-the-ground contributions. The role of the supervisor and manager is often not very visible but is crucial (Volunteering New Zealand, 2015). Improved supervision requirements would change the ratio of volunteers to supervisors required, which could limit numbers of volunteer positions available with certified organisations.

If the number of voluntourism opportunities with accredited organisations becomes limited, possibly a renewed north-north volunteering approach is needed. Young people want to be engaged, they want to learn, and to feel they are contributing, which are all experiences that are possible in one's home country. If opportunities were more available for young people in developed countries to engage within their own communities, then some of their needs could be fulfilled without seeking a north-south voluntourism experience.

## Conclusion

Measurement of the true impact of voluntourism on host countries has been limited and has shown mixed results, not least due to different understandings of good community development. With the recent publication *TSISCDP*, the time is right for a renewed and focused attempt to measure the impacts of voluntourism on community development. Some volunteer tourism organisations are already interested in having this understanding and in developing standard measures for good practice that can be applied to their volunteering projects.

Developing standards for voluntourism that fit within the IACD understanding of community development could enable international accreditation and certification processes of volunteering organisations. The



A small number of volunteers shadow staff of this livelihood programme in Samoa. Volunteers are well supervised and contribute to development projects that are monitored by a local non-governmental organisation Women in Business Development Inc, in partnership with Oxfam.

*TS/SCDP* standards have provided a starting point for further discussions; given the continued growth of the multi-billion dollar voluntourism industry, it seems necessary that these standards are now applied to it, and that a framework for an accreditation system is developed. This would be a beneficial collaborative undertaking, as short-term volunteering can either support or completely undermine what community-development practitioners are working to achieve.

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