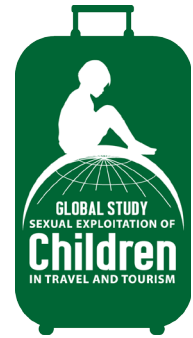


EXPERT PAPER



FROM VOLUNTEERING TO VOLUN-TOURISM

CHALLENGES FOR THE RESPONSIBLE MANAGEMENT OF A GROWING TRAVEL TREND

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INTRODUCTION

For many years, Volunteering in so-called developing countries was mainly organised individually by church communities, solidarity groups and students in Europe, North America and Australia / New Zealand. Today, there are also families, active senior citizens, as well as employees during a sabbatical who are interested in volunteering abroad. People who have worked as volunteers for an organisation in a developing country will not only return with profound memories. In many cases, their world view has also changed positively.

The long duration of stay and the intensive preparation associated with “traditional” volunteering represent a major obstacle to many people interested. They, therefore, start to look for packages, which can be booked. The concept of volun-tourism – short-term volunteer work with high adventure and experience-related content – has in the past few years gained massive importance. Spontaneously helping out for a day during a holiday, adding a week after a safari or joining a project for one to three months – many different offers can be found on the Internet and in travel catalogues. Modern Information and Communications technology, affordable flight connections and increasing travel experience of tourists are additional factors facilitating this development.

Tour operators are increasingly discovering the now lucrative business field “travel and help”. Development-related learning through intensive preparation and follow-up, effective child protection and cooperation at eye-level with local organisations are important criteria for effective and responsible volunteering and not yet standard in the “business”.

Volunteering as a touristic product

The trends in supply and demand make volunteering products more and more touristic and commercially more marketable. Therefore, there is a danger that the interests of paying tourists gain importance while the wishes and needs of the local communities move to the background.

The commercialisation of volunteering requires shorter durations of stay and a high degree of flexibility in regard to the working hours and the activities. The projects most suitable for volun-tourism are those where volunteers can join the work without specific previous experience and where it does not take them much time to familiarise themselves with the project. Especially in this kind of work, volunteers compete with local employees as they offer their services free of charge. Many current volun-tourism products are advertised by using poverty-related marketing. In such presentations, the people in developing countries and emerging economies are often passive aid recipients, while the travellers are being stylised as active do-gooders. Many volun-tourism operators simplify the admission criteria for volunteer services considerably in order to send as many volunteers as possible. An intensive selection process would not only be costly and take more time, it would also make it impossible to assign every candidate to a project. While many volun-tourism products cater to the interests of travellers, this happens at the cost of the interests of local communities. Case studies show that volun-tourism often lacks a participatory and long-term project planning involving the local population.

Respecting the well-being of the child

Projects in which volunteers directly work with children in schools, play schools, youth clubs or even orphanages are the most popular form of volun-tourism, also because the work is varied and apparently does not require much pedagogical qualification. A consequent child protection approach to volun-tourism is needed. It goes beyond the urgent and important imperative to stop orphanage tourism immediately because it is putting children at risk and is often linked to child trafficking and corruption.¹

Although volunteering with children might have some positive effects like introducing new ideas for games, providing language courses by native speakers or necessary helping hands to schools or youth clubs with scarce human resources, projects with children require special caution in the preparation and implementation. Projects with children should not cater to the interests of the volunteers but take into account the high risks regarding the well-being of the children.

The receiving organisations cannot always guarantee that the work of the volunteers will be used meaningfully because they lack training concepts and staff capacities to guide volunteers. For example, there is a danger that volunteers in schools repeatedly teach children the same things at a low level (Unicef 2011). In many cases, children cannot be protected sufficiently. There is a high danger of sexual and physical abuse, as there are countless opportunities for volunteers to spend time with children

¹ Better Care Network, "Why the industry needs to withdraw from orphanage tourism", Travel and Tour World, 25 November 2015 <http://www.travelandtourworld.com/news/article/why-the-industry-needs-to-withdraw-from-orphanage-tourism/>

or to be alone with them during voluntourism projects or when living with host families. Many local institutions do not have enough staff to ensure permanent supervision by qualified staff in order to prevent abuse. The local employees do not always seem to be sufficiently aware of the risks involved for children, for example when guests offer to take a child on an excursion (Terre des Hommes, Unicef 2008).

Furthermore, the children and youth in the projects often regard volunteers as role models. Alcohol, cigarette and drug consumption may therefore have negative impacts. Love affairs between volunteers and local youths often cause major problems on the ground (Tomazos & Butler 2010). Tour operators offering leisure-oriented volunteer positions often shy away from checking whether their customers behave adequately during their work.

As our recent research shows, child protection measures are far from standard in the sector, even though 41 out of the 44 projects analysed include work with children.² When volunteers live in host families, there is also a possibility of direct contact with children, which demands special sensitivity.

Lack of selection criteria and preparation of the volunteers

Tour operators do not usually pre-select volunteers with regard to personal suitability or practical experience. Some operators explicitly advertise that every candidate can be assigned a position. Out of 44 projects analysed, 79 percent did not ask the volunteers for a CV and almost none of them required references or even conducted a personal interview before departure. Only 16 percent of the operators

asked about previous job experience and not many more demanded at least a letter of motivation. While criminal records should be checked in a standardised manner, less than half of the projects do so as a precondition for the application.

Preparation also plays a central role in designing the stay in a sustainable manner. Only one out of 23 operators offered a compulsory preparation course in Germany prior to departure.

The majority of operators organise courses in the host countries. Only 37 percent offer a one to two days preparation course on location. In most cases, these courses have to be booked and paid separately and are not a condition to embark on the trip.

Lack of Rules of Conduct for Travellers

In none of the offers analysed were child protection risks pointed out to customers or candidates in the publicly available project descriptions. Only one out of four operators had a code of conduct for travellers. In their codes, only four operators explicitly pointed out recommended behaviour towards children. In these cases, volunteers get advice on how to protect the privacy of the children, especially with regard to photos. They are also informed that it is prohibited to take children off the project compound.

Lack of Child Protection Strategies

Of the operators analysed, 22 out of 23 did not have any child protection policy that would describe in a binding and transparent manner all the measures taken to protect children and that would mention specific responsibilities.

²This article is a shortened version of the study "From Volunteering to Voluntourism" published by Tourism Watch – Bread for the World, Working Group Tourism & Development (akte) and ECPAT Germany in 2015 and mainly highlights the risks and requirements associated with child protection in the context of volun-tourism.

SUGGESTIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Requirements in Regard to Child Protection

All providers of volunteer services, being they commercial, non-commercial or intermediate forms, are required to develop standards to protect children effectively.

- Operators should introduce a child protection policy in the company and develop a child protection management system. A child protection policy describes the responsibilities for child protection in the company and bundles tangible measures. A risk and impact assessment with regard to the rights of the child is part of the policy.³
- An important part of the child protection policy is a code of conduct for volunteers according to which they assure in writing that they will adhere to the rules of the company's internal child protection system. This includes rules on how to deal with children, procedures to report observations of any assaults against the well-being of the children, as well as information on how to handle photos of and with children.
- Operators should introduce tools for the selection of candidates and establish standards such as letters of motivation, CVs and police clearance certificates.
- Operators should ensure a good content-related preparation of volunteers. Preparation courses should include special sensitisation with regard to the rights of the child.
- Operators should offer stays which are as long as possible and allow for sufficient time in the receiving organisation for the preparation of volunteers. They should not offer short-

term stays in projects with children and offer placements in orphanages only as part of volunteer services that last for more than six months and include intensive preparation of the volunteers. The local partners have to be screened carefully to guarantee that the orphanage corresponds to the standards of the United Nations Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children.

Child protection initiatives and tourism certifiers should adapt their activities to the special requirements of volun-tourism.

- Child protection measures such as the Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism of the organisation The Code were developed with the objective of reducing the risks of children worldwide of falling victim to commercial sexual exploitation. The measures by tour operators mainly refer to training programmes for their own staff and awareness raising amongst travellers. Up till now, the Child Protection Code has not been able to adequately address the impacts and risks of volun-tourism and to ensure effective child protection in this field. The Code should develop further measures in the field of volun-tourism. Child protection policies should be part of management strategies of volun-tourism operators. They capture the impacts of business operations on the well-being of children, reduce risks in a targeted manner and develop adequate options to deal with violations of child rights.
- Apart from the ecological footprint and the social impacts of travel, which can already be assessed in the context of sustainability certification, volun-tourism involves particular requirements with regard to child protection and cooperation with local organisations. The standards should include the existence of a child protection policy and a code of conduct for travellers, as well as written contracts with

³The human rights management system of the "Roundtable Human Rights in Tourism" may also be applied with a special focus on the rights of the child. www.humanrights-in-tourism.net

the receiving organisations covering financial and non-financial support. The operators should conduct formalised selection and preparation processes that can be verified and should offer the volunteers opportunities for a follow-up. The assessment of these standards should be done by an independent expert and the certification should be recognisable by the customers.

Public institutions and governments should apply measures that take into account the risks associated with volun-tourism.

- The Convention of the Council of Europe on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (the so-called Lanzarote Convention) demands awareness raising with regard to the rights and the protection of children in Article 5. The convention also refers to contacts with children as part of cultural and leisure activities and includes volunteering and volunteer services. The Convention should be ratified and implemented by volunteer sending countries.
- In many countries international tour operators and private volunteer sending agencies are not addressed by national child protection legislation. National law, too, has to reflect the trend of volun-tourism and must be amended and expanded.
- Embassies should raise awareness amongst travellers applying for visas to popular volun-tourism destinations by sending them information and providing information on the country websites about the risks and opportunities of volun-tourism.
- Tourist boards and tourist information offices should also report the consequences of volun-tourism and should point out to travellers that they should only book projects with approved agencies and should not visit children's homes.
- As part of school education and academic advice offered to students interested in going abroad, students should be sensitised for the

development-related importance of volunteering and to handle volun-tourism in a responsible manner. Schools, educational institutions, and youth centres should support young people in selecting a sending organisation or tour operator.

- Governmental institutions should only support volunteer services if they have introduced child protection measures and standards of development-related effectiveness. The activities supported should be part of programmes in development education and intercultural learning. In regulated volunteer services this is already largely the case. With regard to the support of short-term volunteering offered by non-commercial operators, these standards must not be weakened, but must be strengthened.

Tourists and interested volunteers should select the tour operator or sending organisation with due consideration and reflect their own motivation.

- Volun-tourists should only choose projects and activities where they meet the necessary requirements in their home countries.
- Volunteers should not choose operators that focus their marketing on poverty. Neither children, nor the local population should be presented as passive aid recipients in pictures or text.
- Volunteers should stay as long as possible and reflect on their tourism-related expectations. Volunteers should integrate themselves into the project and adapt to the local conditions.
- Volunteers should reflect on the usefulness of their work in projects with children: What does the work mean for the child and is it possible to fulfil the child's expectations that might be raised?

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ABOUT BREAD FOR THE WORLD AND TOURISM WATCH

Bread for the World is the development agency of the Protestant Churches in Germany. In almost 100 countries we empower the poor and marginalised to improve their living conditions by themselves. Through lobbying in Germany we seek to influence political decisions in favor of the poor. Tourism Watch is a special desk at Bread for the World. It's main focus is on human rights, climate justice and corporate responsibility in tourism. Tourism Watch is a critical dialogue-partner to tourism businesses and governments.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Antje Monshausen is a geographer by training and heart, is a policy officer on tourism and development and heads Tourism Watch. She is board member of ECPAT Germany, member of the certification council of TourCert, and German contact point of the multi-stakeholder initiative Roundtable Human Rights in Tourism.