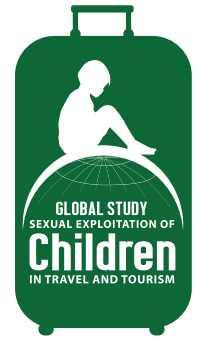


EXPERT PAPER

# VOLUNTEER TOURISM AND THE ISSUE OF CHILD PROTECTION



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## INTRODUCTION



Calabash Tours and its NGO partner Calabash Trust are a social enterprise based in Port Elizabeth South Africa. The company uses tourism and volunteer tourism, in particular, as a way of developing poor communities in the townships or urban slums of the city. Calabash Tours is committed to the principles of social, economic and environmental justice. Through our commitment to human rights, we became aware of the issues of child protection within the travel and tourism sector. Upon recognising some of the abuses of children's rights in the sector, Calabash Tours went about putting its own house in order, ensuring that it upheld child protection standards within the company. What follows is a reflection of the key issues as experienced practically in the area of volunteer tourism.

Volunteer tourism, or Voluntourism, is a rapidly growing segment of the tourism sector and is being offered by more and more tour operators. Most of the placements operate within a North/South framework, with volunteers from the developed world paying to volunteer in the developing world. Historically, these kinds of programmes were run by NGO partnerships, and sometimes through state funded entities like the U.S. Peace Corps. However, in the last 15 years these offerings have moved more and more into the catalogues of tour operators and sending organisations specialising in volunteer travel.

The commercialisation of these programmes carries with it the risk of negative impacts, and one area where these risks are most prominent is within the realm of child protection.

The most speaking examples of this has been in the various exposures of orphanage tourism and its links to child trafficking, and in extreme circumstances, the sexual exploitation of children.

Cambodia is one country where these issues manifested, but certainly not the only one. Many of the more responsible sending organisations have removed orphanage volunteer programmes, but not all. The publicity given to this particular type of child exploitation is understandable, as it is dramatic and the issues are clear. There are, however, many more risks to children within the volunteer tourism context.

In many instances, poor children in developing countries are given less respect than children in the same context within the developed world. In many European countries, soccer coaches, church leaders, scout leaders, youth workers – in fact anyone working with children -- are expected to be vetted for relevant criminal history. Often this involves a criminal record check. However, most volunteer sending organisations are more than happy to place any person who can pay the costs themselves in a position with direct child contact.

Children in developing countries are often not perceived to have similar emotions, emotional needs or attachments compared with those children in the developed world. It appears to be acceptable to most volunteer sending organisations that children need love from volunteers, regardless of how often those people may change, leave them or perhaps not even be capable of giving much love. Vulnerable children are treated as commodities that “need” volunteers – whereas very often the emotional damage inflicted is testimony that this is not the case.

Often children are also exploited in having to settle for behaviours that would not be tolerated in the developed world. For example, in many Asian, African and Latin American countries children are exposed to poor teaching practices by young people who would never be allowed to teach in their home countries. Often these volunteers’ only experience of teaching is having been students in a classroom – but because in the developing world these children may be poor, they are expected to be grateful and learn from volunteers with no teaching experience. Again, often the negative consequences far outweigh the positives, but volunteers keep arriving.

Volunteer sending organisations also make use of images of vulnerable children on social media that are both patronising and exploitative. Images of white youth cuddling and playing with young African or Asian children are common. Most often, no guardian or parental consent has been sought before these images are published.

There are ways in which volunteer programmes can support projects that involve children in a way that minimises the negative impacts.

Firstly, all volunteers should be screened either by the sending organisation or the receiving organisation. Secondly, all sending and receiving organisations need to have child protection policies in place, including a Code of Conduct for the volunteer to sign. The Code of Conduct should outline both appropriate and inappropriate behaviour (an example is attached in annex 1). The child protection policies should describe the steps in place if a complaint is received. All projects receiving volunteers should have final say (informed consent) in accepting or rejecting volunteers.

Lastly, and most importantly, volunteers should be building capacity amongst local staff who work with children. If they do not have any specific skills in this regard, they should not be working with children. Children from vulnerable communities need to be supported by members of their own community – not people who come from abroad who may lack cultural sensitivity and skills.

The volunteer tourism sector can make a positive contribution to the lives of children, but this must be done in a way that encourages the rights of children to be treated with respect and dignity, regardless of poverty or marginalised status. It must always be done with the understanding that children do best in their own communities and cared for by people from their own communities. Indeed, the role of volunteer organisations should be to build that capacity within local caregivers and community volunteers.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Miedema has a post graduate degree in Development Studies, and started Calabash Tours in 1997. The company is a commercial venture, with a strong social agenda, with a particular focus on poverty reduction in the Urban Townships of Port Elizabeth. Paul Miedema also founded the Calabash Trust, in 2000, which is a developmental NGO, focusing on Education issues, and uses Travel Philanthropy as a method of funding. Calabash Tours has been at the forefront of innovative, “pro poor” and sustainable tourism practice in South Africa. Calabash Tours specializes in ethical volunteer travel, for individuals, international schools and universities, as well as a variety of day and evening township experiences. Paul Miedema has extensive experience in product development that serves poor communities, and taking innovative product into the market. In 2004, the company won the Responsible Tourism Awards at WTM. The company has numerous products accredited with Fair Trade Tourism, and the Calabash Tours model has often been studied, used as a case study, and has been shared wherever possible. Paul Miedema also works as a tourism consultant in the area of Heritage, Sustainable Tourism and Volunteer Tourism. Paul has spoken on numerous panels, at conferences and workshops around his practical experiences of using tourism as a development tool in poor communities. Paul is passionate about transforming the tourism industry into an industry that truly creates “better places for people to live in, and visit”.

## ANNEX 1 - CODE OF CONDUCT

A good Child Protection Code should include the following:

This Code of Conduct outlines appropriate standards of behaviour for all volunteers, whether long term or temporary. The Code serves to protect volunteers by avoiding allegations being made. It also serves to protect children and reduce any opportunities for abuse or harm to occur.

All volunteers are expected to comply with this Code of Conduct.

### General Conduct

#### WE WILL:

- Treat children and young people with respect, listen to and value their ideas and opinions;
- Listen to children and take relevant and appropriate action to protect their well-being.
- Report any violations of these standards of behaviour.
- Be aware of situations which may present risks and manage them effectively.
- Be visible and not work alone with the children, as far as possible.
- Have a named Child Protection Officer – with people and places and in the local Project Management Team.

### WE WILL NOT:

- Hit or otherwise physically assault or abuse children.
- Interact with any child in a manner which is inappropriate or sexually provocative.
- Seek to use children in any way to meet adult needs.
- Use prejudice, oppressive behaviour and language with children.
- Discriminate on the basis of age, gender, race, culture, vulnerability or sexuality or HIV Status;
- Develop 'special' relationships with specific children.
- Develop physical/sexual relationships with children.
- Give gifts or show favouritism.
- Take a child on or in any form of transport without prior agreement by the named Child Protection Officer.
- Have a child/children with whom we are working to stay overnight without prior agreement by the child's parent or guardian.
- Ever be alone with a child in a room with the door closed, or spend excessive time alone with children away from others.

This is not a complete list. The basic understanding is that we will all avoid actions or behaviour which may constitute bad practise or potentially abusive behaviour.

### Photography and Video Conduct

#### I AGREE:

- To seek informed consent from the child and/or his/her parents or guardian prior to a recording, photograph or image being taken.
- To explain how and where this material will be used.
- Not to use a child's name on any social networking sites, webpage or printed materials. This is for the child's protection. Names may be changed and this change must be indicated.
- Not to post or publish photographs or videos of individual children in such a manner that might lead to that child being identified or put at risk.
- Not to take images that could be perceived as sexually provocative or degrading.