



Volunteering and development: neo-colonialism, cultural (mis)understanding and patronage networks

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Volunteer tourism

- A rapidly expanding activity
- Many organisations offering placements
 - Profit-making: 'i-to-i'
 - Non-profit- Universities/Schools, Project Trust, Village-to-Village
- Criticism
 - Development Tourism
 - Neo-colonialist
- VSO says 'you are better off backpacking'

A small but growing literature

- Kate Simpson- volunteering as neo-colonialism and reinforcing stereotypes.
- Andrew Jones & others- volunteering as personal development
- Tourism Concern- unregulated and uneven consumer experience
- Brown & Hall- an individualised consumer activity not a development solution
- Mdee & Emmott/Fee- Understanding community impact / responsible volunteering

Neo-colonial

- Attitudes ‘we know best’
- Often a one way transmission- developed to developing countries (some exceptions)
- Promotes myths and stereotypes
 - People are waiting to be ‘saved’
 - People need pity
 - You (personally) will change things
- A glorified holiday to add to the CV



Globalising, humanising civil society

- Volunteering can be transformational
- It can shape global citizens who don't accept global inequalities
- It can benefit the organisations and communities who receive them
 - Economically
 - Socially



Neo-colonialism or misplaced idealism?

- Predominantly volunteers from rich countries working in poor countries (economic and political freedom to travel)
- Young, (relatively) rich and idealistic- willing to learn?
- Displacing local employment
- Inappropriate and ineffective projects- white elephants, shipping containers, painting schools and weighing babies



Cultural (mis)understandings

- Time
- Bureaucracy, hierarchy and process
- Showing respect
- Challenging attitudes- race, gender, sexuality, religion
- Wealth



Patronage Networks

- Volunteers- a source of wealth and power?
- Connections to external resources
- Desire to 'help'
- Choosing who to 'help'
- 'These are our Mzungus!'



Village-to-Village

- A small UK charity funding development projects in Tanzania partly through facilitating volunteering
- Partners with V2V-Tz- a local sister NGO employing 10 local staff
- Integrated in local community
- Some fantastic volunteers- others a massive drain on resources and energy



Effective volunteering

- Personal attitude and expectations- when you go to learn and to listen and not to save the world/have a holiday
- Providing pro-poor tourism routes which stimulate local economies and provide employment
- When the altruistic impulse is channelled

This is more likely when:

- Placements are longer-term
- They are structured and fit in a programme of on-going activities
- Volunteers are prepared for *service* (not to be served) and reflect on the experience afterwards



What we need?

- Fair Trade Certification?
- Responsible volunteering association
- Structured and supported credit-bearing placements- with critical reflection built in
- Recognition that ‘doing development’ is a complex and political action.



Some views

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ymcflrj_rRc

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s_wpVzoLO0A