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Doing Good or Doing Harm? A Critical Examination of Voluntourism in a Globalized World

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Figure 1 [Image Source: Sujan Pariyar].

Voluntourism—the practice of combining travel with volunteer work—has become increasingly popular in recent years, particularly among young people from the Global North seeking meaningful, short-term experiences in the Global South. Today, the industry is estimated to generate between USD $2–3 billion annually and attract over 10 million participants each year (Avolio et al., 2024).

Marketed as a way to "make a difference" in impoverished communities while learning about other cultures, voluntourism programs promise personal growth, adventure, and social impact. Voluntourism allows individuals to contribute to global development by providing services, in sectors such as education, health care, and environmental conservation. Despite often being motivated by good intentions, voluntourism raises complex ethical questions about global inequality. Scholars and practitioners alike have begun to question who really benefits from these programs—and at what cost?

This article critically examines voluntourism by exploring how good intentions can obscure deeper issues of global inequality, and how well-meaning individuals may inadvertently reinforce the inequalities they hope to challenge. By highlighting the risks of unskilled, short-term volunteering, the commodification of aid, and the framing of the Global South as a site of Western intervention, this piece calls for a rethinking of voluntourism—one grounded in respect, ethical reflection, and solidarity.

Doing Good, Doing Well?

Voluntourism is often framed as a charitable act benefiting marginalized communities, especially in the Global South. However, a growing body of research shows that the primary beneficiaries of these interventions are often the volunteers and their organizations, rather than the communities they are meant to support (Guiney, 2015; Proyrungroj, 2017). Scholars highlight the numerous advantages voluntourists gain from these experiences, including personal growth, skill development, and enhanced career prospects. Many participants describe their time abroad as transformative—fostering greater cultural awareness, empathy, and a renewed sense of purpose (Alexander, 2012; Freidus, 2017; Proyrungroj, 2017). Beyond emotional and psychological benefits, volunteers often develop practical skills such as cross-cultural communication and adaptability, and in some cases, enhance their employability (Lough et al., 2011; Palacios, 2010).

Voluntourism organizations—particularly for-profit companies—benefit greatly from this practice. Today, a large portion of the voluntourism industry is driven by private enterprises that charge volunteers up to thousands of dollars for short-term placements (Mostafanezhad, 2013; Sin, 2010). Although these programs are marketed as altruistic, much of the voluntourists' financial contribution remains with the voluntourism companies rather than directly reaching host communities (Kabil et al., 2023). For example, Projects Abroad—one of the world's largest volunteer-sending organizations—has been criticized for allocating as little as 10% of volunteer contributions to the communities they claim to support (Al Jazeera, 2019).

Voluntourism has become a lucrative industry, allowing organizations to "do well by doing good"—or at least by selling the *appearance* of doing good—while taking advantage of travelers' desire to help (Popham, 2015).

Who Really Benefits? The Unequal Rewards of Voluntourism

While voluntourism may offer significant benefits for volunteers and organizations, its impact on host communities remains deeply contested. One of the most criticized practices is orphanage tourism, where volunteers engage in short-term caregiving, teaching, or fundraising activities in residential care institutions. This type of short-term involvement has been shown to negatively impact children, creating cycles of attachment and abandonment that can lead to attachment disorders and developmental delays. As UNICEF (2011, p. 8) warns: *"Many volunteers see it as their role to provide love, thus building strong emotional bonds with the children. However, when the volunteers leave, a few weeks or months later, these bonds are broken and the children are once again left alone."*

Moreover, many orphanages associated with voluntourism fail to meet national and international standards, undermining children's fundamental rights as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Several cases of substandard conditions have been documented in these institutions, including inadequate living environments, poor management, neglect, and instances of abuse (Guiney, 2015; Richter & Norman, 2010). One critical concern is the lack of child safeguarding protocols—many programs do not conduct basic criminal background checks, leaving vulnerable children exposed to serious risks, including exploitation and trafficking (Al Jazeera, 2019).

Figure 2 Tourism Concern petition image. [Image Source: Tourism Concern, 2013].

The rising demand for orphanage placements among foreign volunteers has, in some cases, encouraged the institutionalization of children to sustain the industry (Guiney, 2015; Freidus, 2017). This troubling trend, described by some as the "creation of orphans", reflects how market logic can distort child welfare (Vo, 2024). Contrary to assumptions held in the Global North, the large majority of children in orphanages have at least one living parent (Guiney, 2015). Institutionalization is frequently driven not by abandonment, but by poverty and lack of access to basic services such as education or healthcare. Some institutions even pressure families to give up their children under the guise of providing better opportunities (Benali & Oris, 2019). As Guiney (2015) cautions: *"So long as there is demand, more and more orphanages will open, and more and more children will be taken from their families and communities to fill them."*

This system normalizes unnecessary family separation, undermines family preservation efforts, and keeps children dependent on institutions instead of supporting community-based, sustainable solutions. In response, the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (2009) emphasize that institutional care should be a measure of last resort and advocate strongly for family-based and community-based solutions. The guidelines caution against separating children from their families when the root cause is poverty—not abuse or neglect—highlighting the importance of supporting families rather than replacing them.

Such examples illustrate how voluntourism can inadvertently exploit the very vulnerabilities it seeks to address. When volunteer experiences are prioritized over the rights and needs of local communities, voluntourism risks reinforcing harmful power dynamics, undermining local care systems, and commodifying human suffering under the guise of altruism.

Power, Privilege, and the Politics of Voluntourism

Voluntourism programs can inadvertently reinforce harmful stereotypes, perpetuate systemic inequalities, and promote the idea that Western individuals can "fix" complex social problems in the Global South.

One significant issue is the widespread placement of untrained and unqualified volunteers in critical roles such as teaching, childcare, and healthcare—positions that would typically require formal certification in their home countries (Guttentag, 2009). As one volunteer said, *"Having simply walked up the street, we are now teaching an English class"* (Garland, 2018). In such settings, local professionals and community members are often overlooked, left out in favor of inexperienced outsiders.
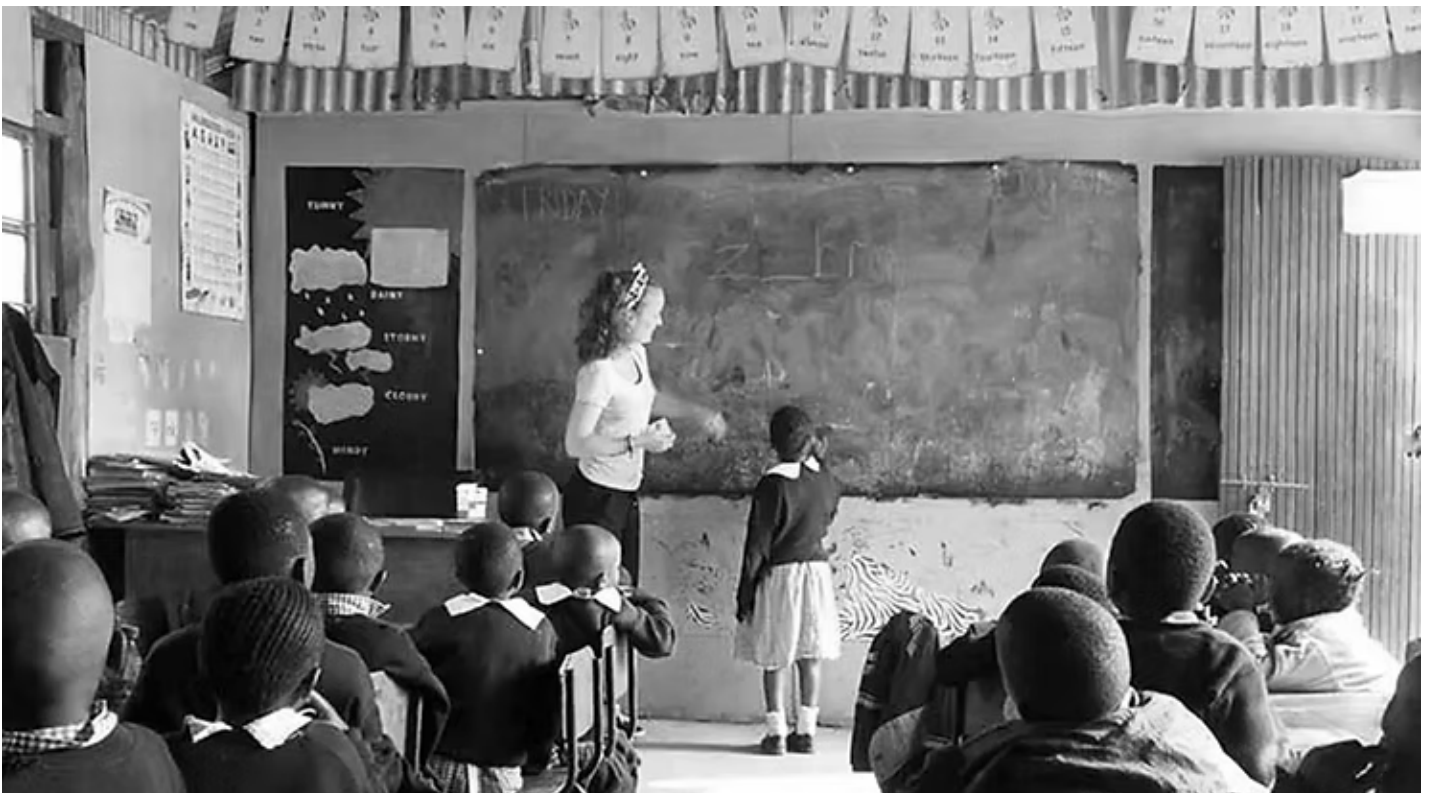
Figure 3 A voluntourist teaching a class through the organization Go Abroad. [Image Source: Go Abroad].

These placements undermine the value of local professionals and reinforce harmful stereotypes rooted in colonial and neocolonial ideologies. They perpetuate the belief that Western individuals are inherently more knowledgeable, skilled, and capable of addressing complex social issues in the Global South, regardless of their actual expertise or understanding of local contexts.

These assumptions further perpetuate the dichotomy of 'us' and 'them,' a process sometimes referred to as *othering*. Volunteers from the Global North often construct the communities they engage with as fundamentally different, vulnerable, and in need of saving (Mostafanezhad, 2014). Through the process of othering, voluntourism reinforces stereotypes and dependency rather than empowering local communities. Instead of fostering solidarity and challenging systems of inequality, voluntourism sustains a world divided between active 'helpers' and passive 'receivers,' a division rooted in longstanding global inequalities (Simpson, 2004).

Promotional narratives produced by sending organizations often reflect and reinforce this worldview. For example, Projects Abroad (2018) describes Nepal as *"one of the poorest countries in the world,"* lacking infrastructure and technological development, and asserts that *"volunteer aid is crucial for Nepal's development."* This framing suggests that countries like Nepal are incapable of supporting themselves without foreign intervention, thereby legitimizing voluntourists' involvement while simultaneously diminishing local agency and obscuring systemic inequalities.

Within this framework, poverty is often portrayed as cultural or due to misfortune, rather than as the consequence of enduring inequality (Freidus, 2016; Simpson, 2004). Such a narrative obscures the lasting impacts of colonialism and overlooks the harmful consequences of neoliberal reforms and international financial policies. In doing so, they depoliticize poverty, shifting attention away from the structural forces that sustain it, and allowing political and economic elites to avoid responsibility.

This ignorance has been called 'innocent gaze' (Calkin, 2014), where voluntourists engage with communities without critically reflecting on their own privilege or the broader political, economic, and historical contexts that have shaped the conditions they encounter. By maintaining this innocent gaze, volunteers may unintentionally reproduce harmful dynamics, reinforcing simplistic understandings of global inequality. They perpetuate a vision of the world where the Global North "saves" the Global South, while failing to question the underlying structures of domination and injustice. In doing so, voluntourism sustains the illusion that meaningful change can occur by small individual actions without confronting the deeper political and economic causes of global inequality.

Rethinking Voluntourism: Critical Reflection, Systemic Awareness, and Community Collaboration

Voluntourism has faced extensive criticism for focusing mainly on the *volunteers'* desire to "do good", which often turns poverty into a tourist attraction and

can exacerbate local challenges by displacing local workers, undermining local expertise, or reinforcing stereotypes. In response, scholars, practitioners, and communities have increasingly called for alternative models rooted in solidarity, mutual learning, and equitable partnerships.

Rethinking voluntourism begins with a commitment to critical self-reflection. Volunteers must interrogate their motivations—asking whether their desire to "help" is rooted in genuine solidarity or shaped by paternalistic assumptions, personal gain, or the appeal of feel-good altruism. As scholars argue, ethically engaging in global service requires shifting from a mindset of "saving" to one of listening, learning, and supporting (Baillie Smith & Laurie, 2011; Vrasti, 2013). Equally important is developing a systemic awareness of global inequality and critically reflecting on one's own positionality—recognizing how one's nationality, race, class, and the broader economic and political systems one is part of may contribute to the very conditions they encounter abroad.

To avoid reproducing unequal dynamics, voluntourism must prioritize community collaboration. This involves centering the voices of local stakeholders in project design, implementation, and evaluation. Models such as Fair Trade Learning and community-led initiatives foreground reciprocity, equity, and long-term relationships between volunteers and host communities (Hartman et al., 2014). These approaches treat host communities not as passive recipients of aid, but as equal partners with valuable knowledge and leadership. In this model, volunteering becomes less about helping and more about building respectful, informed relationships across differences (Higgins-Desbiolles & Russell-Mundine, 2008; Hartman et al., 2014).

In addition, long-term, skills-based volunteering—as seen in initiatives like the Peace Corps and Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO)—offers a more ethical and effective alternative. These programs match trained volunteers with roles specifically identified by local communities, allowing time to build trust, adapt to cultural contexts, and contribute in ways that reinforce rather than replace local capacity (Biddle, 2014).

Ultimately, these models reject the "savior" mentality that underpins much of mainstream voluntourism. Instead, they center values of justice, humility, and shared responsibility, creating space for more respectful, informed, and transformative global engagement.

Glossary:

- **Abuse:** The harmful treatment of a person, often causing physical, emotional, or psychological damage. It can include actions like hitting, insulting, neglecting, or controlling someone.

- **Altruistic:** Showing a selfless concern for the well-being of others. An altruistic person helps others without expecting anything in return.

- **Attachment disorders**: Emotional and behavioral difficulties that happen when a child does not form a healthy bond with their caregiver, often due to neglect, trauma, or early separation.

- **Beneficiaries:** People or groups who receive help, support, or advantages from a program, service, or action.

- **Child welfare:** The efforts, services, and policies designed to ensure the safety, well-being, and healthy development of children. It includes protecting children from abuse and neglect and providing support for families and caregivers.

- **Colonial and neocolonial ideologies**: Beliefs that justify and maintain the dominance of powerful countries over less powerful ones — through direct control in colonial times, and through economic, political, or cultural influence today — often reinforcing global inequalities.

- **Colonialism**: The practice where a country takes control of another territory, often by force, and exploits its people and resources for its own benefit.

- **Commodifying:** Turning something—often something not usually bought or sold, like a human experience, relationship, or idea—into a product that can be traded or sold for profit.

- **Criminal background check:** Review of a person's criminal history, typically used by employers, landlords, or organizations to see if someone has been arrested, charged, or convicted of a crime.

- **Cultural awareness**: The understanding and appreciation of the differences and similarities between cultures. It involves being aware of your own cultural background and recognizing how culture influences beliefs, behaviors, and interactions.

- **Depoliticize:** Remove or reduce the political aspects or influence of something. It involves making an issue, action, or institution appear neutral or separate from political debate or power struggles.

- **Developmental delays**: When a child does not reach expected milestones in areas like movement, speech, learning, or social skills at the usual age.

- **Dichotomy:** A division between two opposite or very different things. It often refers to a way of thinking that separates complex ideas into two contrasting categories, like good vs. bad or male vs. female.

- **Economic elites:** The small group of people or organizations who hold significant wealth, resources, and financial power in a society. They often have strong influence over economic policies and decisions.

- **Enhanced:** Improved, made better, or increased in quality, value, or effectiveness.

- **Enterprises**: Businesses or organizations that are created to produce goods or provide services. They can range from small companies to large corporations and may be driven by profit, social goals, or both.

- **Environmental conservation:** The protection and careful management of natural resources and the environment to prevent damage, preserve biodiversity, and ensure sustainability for future generations.

- **Empathy:** The ability to understand and share the feelings of another person. It means putting yourself in someone else's shoes and responding with care and compassion.

- **Ethical**: Morally right or wrong, or related to principles of good behavior and fairness.

- **Exploitation:** The unfair use of someone or something for personal gain, often by taking advantage of another person's weakness, labor, or situation.

- **Fair Trade Learning:** A global engagement model that emphasizes reciprocity, transparency, and sustainability, ensuring that educational and volunteer experiences are co-created with host communities, and that those communities benefit meaningfully and equitably from the collaboration.

- **Fundamental rights:** The basic human rights and freedoms that every person is entitled to, such as the right to life, freedom of speech, equality, and protection under the law. These rights are often guaranteed by a country's constitution or international agreements.

- **Global aid and Development**: Efforts to improve living conditions, reduce poverty, and promote economic, social, and political progress around the world, especially in less wealthy countries.

- **Global inequality**: The unequal distribution of resources, wealth, and opportunities between countries and populations around the world.

- **Global North and Global South**: Terms used to describe the divide between wealthier, more developed countries (Global North) and poorer, less developed countries (Global South), based on historical and economic inequalities rather than geography.

- **Humility:** The quality of being modest and not thinking you are better or more important than others. It means having a realistic view of your strengths and limitations.

- **Inadvertently:** Accidentally or without intending to.

- **Industry:** The production of goods or services within an economy.

- **Innocent gaze:** A supposedly neutral or altruistic perspective that overlooks its own bias and complicity in power structures, often masking colonial or unequal dynamics.

- **Infrastructure:** The basic physical and organizational structures and systems needed for a society or organization to function. This includes things like roads, bridges, electricity, water supply, schools, and communication networks.

- **Institutionalization of children**: The practice of placing children in large residential facilities, like orphanages, instead of growing up in family-based care, often leading to negative effects on their emotional and social development.

- **International financial policies**: Rules and agreements set by global organizations and governments that guide how money moves between countries, often affecting trade, loans, and economic development.

- **Impoverished:** A person, community, or country that doesn't have enough to meet basic needs like food, housing, or healthcare.

- **Interrogate:** To ask someone questions thoroughly, often in a formal or intense way. It can also mean to closely examine or question an idea, belief, or system.

- **Local agency**: The ability of people in a community to make their own decisions and take action to shape their lives and future.

- **Lucrative**: Something that brings in a lot of money or profit.

- **Marginalized:** people or groups who are pushed to the edge of society and denied equal access to rights, resources, and opportunities.

- **Market logic**: The way decisions and actions are guided by the principles of the free market—such as competition, profit, efficiency, and supply and demand—often prioritizing economic value over social or ethical concerns.

- **National and international standards**: Agreed rules or guidelines set by a country or by groups of countries to ensure quality, safety, and fairness in different areas like education, health, or human rights.

- **Neoliberal reforms**: Changes in policies that focus on free markets, privatization, and reducing government involvement in the economy, often leading to greater inequality and weaker public services.

- **Obscuring:** Making something unclear, hidden, or difficult to understand or see.

- **Orphanage:** In general, a place where children without parents or guardians live and are cared for.

- **Paternalistic:** An attitude or action where someone in power makes decisions for others, claiming it's for their own good, but without giving them a say. It often implies control, like a parent over a child, and can overlook people's ability to make their own choices.

- **Peace Corps:** A U.S. government program that places volunteers in countries around the world to support education, health, agriculture, and community development initiatives, aiming to foster cross-cultural understanding and sustainable development.

- **Practitioners:** People who actively work in a profession or field, using their skills and knowledge in real-life situations.

- **Promotional:** Something done to advertise, support, or increase interest in a product, service, event, or idea. It's often used in marketing to attract attention or boost sales.

- **Safeguarding protocols**: Rules and procedures designed to protect people, especially children and vulnerable adults, from harm, abuse, or exploitation.
- **Savior:** Someone who rescues or saves others from danger, harm, or difficulty. It can be used literally (e.g., saving a life) or figuratively (e.g., helping a struggling group or situation).
- **Scholars:** Academics or researchers who study and produce knowledge through theory and research.
- **Social impact:** The effect an action, project, or organization has on people and communities — especially in terms of improving well-being, equality, or quality of life.
- **Stakeholders:** Individuals or groups who have an interest in or are affected by a project, decision, or organization. This can include employees, customers, investors, community members, or government bodies.
- **Stereotypes:** Oversimplified and fixed ideas or beliefs about a group of people. They often ignore individual differences and can lead to unfair judgments or discrimination.
- **Structural forces**: systems and rules in society — like the economy, politics, or laws — that shape people's lives and opportunities, often in ways they can't easily control.
- **Sustainable:** Something that can be maintained over time without causing harm to people, the environment, or future resources. It often refers to practices that are environmentally friendly and socially responsible.
- **Systemic inequalities**: Unfair differences built into the structures of society, like education, healthcare, or the economy, that keep some groups disadvantaged over time.
- **Recipients:** People or groups who receive something, such as a gift, message, service, or benefit.
- **Trafficking:** The illegal trade or movement of people, goods, or services, often involving exploitation. When referring to people, it usually means forcing or deceiving someone into labor, sexual exploitation, or other forms of abuse.
- **Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO)**: An international development NGO that recruits volunteers to work with local communities and institutions to improve education, health, and livelihoods, aiming for sustainable, locally driven change.
- **Western intervention**: Actions taken by Western countries (typically the U.S., Canada, and countries in Western Europe) to influence or become involved in the affairs of other nations, often in the Global South.

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