

2017

Voluntourism and the Role of the Host Organization

Divya Sahasrabuddhe

Monash University, divya.divyas@gmail.com

Joseph M. Cheer

Monash University, Australia, joseph.cheer@monash.edu

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Recommended Citation

Sahasrabuddhe, Divya and Cheer, Joseph M. (2017) "Voluntourism and the Role of the Host Organization," *Critical Tourism Studies Proceedings*: Vol. 2017 , Article 26.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.library.tru.ca/cts-proceedings/vol2017/iss1/26>

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Title: Voluntourism and the Role of the Host Organization

Author: Divya Sahasrabudde & Joseph M. Cheer

Affiliation: Monash University

Contact: divya.divyas@gmail.com

Session Type: Presentation

Abstract:

Volunteering overseas for development through International Volunteer Sending Agencies (IVSAs) originated in civil society organizations and has evolved to include bilateral or multilateral funded projects, local and international charities and NGOs, businesses, social enterprises, and the tourism industry. The term “voluntourism” refers to relatively affluent western tourists who pay to volunteer in an organized way in less privileged communities (mostly in the Global South) to directly or indirectly help alleviate material poverty in the host environment. It is a profit-driven activity occurring within an unregulated industry, where tourists typically pay businesses located in the Global North, to participate in volunteer projects in less developed countries and communities. Tomazos and Cooper (2012) reveal that the top 10 recipient countries of voluntourism have grown from a total of 223 projects, collectively in 2003, to 3334 in 2011. India ranks first on the list, with 437 volunteer projects. The scale of its expansion in recent years has become a subject of interest among academics, discussing, in particular, volunteer motivations and perceptions, and the merits and criticisms of voluntourism. Common criticisms are that voluntourism is competitive and highly commercialized, that it is neo-colonial in its tendency to impose western values on host cultures, and that it considers inexperienced, unskilled volunteers as having something important to offer to the Global South. The range of volunteer organizations and IVSAs, types of projects offered, and destinations available to potential volunteers has produced varied results in academic research, although it focuses predominantly on previous, current, and potential volunteers, and less so on the volunteer organization or project beneficiaries. The success or failure of the voluntourism experience, indeed of the project itself, is contingent on a number of players in addition to the volunteers themselves. This exploratory case study draws on 4 weeks of participatory observation in a volunteer project in Kerala, India, where volunteers were involved in projects centred on education, women’s empowerment, and public health. As a principally qualitative study, it triangulates observational field notes by the primary author, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and a self-administered paper-based survey instrument with 12 participating volunteers of varying skills and qualifications. Emphasis is placed on the professional experience and expectations of respondents, and their perceptions of the project and organization. Moreover, this study examines volunteer feedback regarding the organizational training and support received, and the company’s capacity to meet the demands of local partner organizations when working in developing countries with a high turnover of volunteers and personnel. Key findings reveal that the awareness of the power dynamic between the company and host community, frequent turnover, and current professional experience pool within the organization are critical factors that influence the success or failure of the volunteer experience, and indeed, of the project itself.

References:

Tomazos, K., & Cooper, W. (2012). Volunteer tourism: At the crossroads of commercialisation and service? *Current Issues in Tourism*, 15(5), 405–423.