

Workshop Report: “Voluntourism” in the culture sector: Added value or valueless exploitation?¹

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1. Introduction

Voluntourism² is a growing phenomenon in Europe and across the globe. This article explores some of the issues related to voluntourism in the culture sector. Concerns are highlighted, and the extent to which it brings real added value to shared, community-led, volunteer-based cultural projects is explored. The conclusions contain answers to key questions, as identified by workshop participants, such as whether it is acceptable to pay fees and if there should be agreed quality standards.

2. Context

Volunteering and tourism are both phenomenon motivated by passion and interest in a particular subject and are both something that people generally engage with in their free time. Concepts and feelings such as excitement, memories, opportunities, entertainment, free time, travel, new experiences and pleasure are common to both. It is therefore no surprise that there is a growing trend towards linking the two concepts. As people's time becomes increasingly under pressure, due to the vast range of opportunities that are available for them to experience, both online and offline, the idea to combine time that is available to be dedicated for tourism and a holiday, with time that could be committed for solidarity purposes, is increasingly attractive to an ever-greater number of people. As with many other phenomena, different individuals and organisations have identified a 'business potential' in this proposition. There is an expanding multi-billion Euro industry of what has now come to be known as 'voluntourism sector'.

3. Concerns

Many individuals and organisations, including the European Volunteer Centre (CEV), have identified concerns around the issue of voluntourism. CEV has recently

¹ Workshop was held at the European Volunteer Centre “Volunteering in Culture” (VIC) Capacity Building Conference, 19-20 April 2018, Rijeka, Croatia.

² “Definition of Voluntourism”, Collins Dictionary, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/voluntourism>, Last seen September 10th 2018.

adopted a policy position³ and published a research report⁴ that highlight the features of voluntourism that are at odds with characteristics that are generally considered to be intrinsic to, and essential for, good quality volunteering. It has been noted with worry that some voluntourism programs are mis-sold and participants can pay fees for experiences which are little more than a holiday and provide no real volunteering opportunities or involve actions designed to meet real local needs. Another issue identified is that many programmes, rather than being based on a real understanding of need and community partnership, that should be at the basis of all volunteering initiatives, focus more on the presumed needs of the community, positioning the ‘voluntourist’ as a benevolent giver rather than someone genuinely able to bring sustainable added value to the resolution of challenges and problems.

At the *Volunteering in Culture Capacity Building Conference*, organised by CEV and attended by more than one hundred volunteering stakeholders from across Europe, the issue of voluntourism, related in particular to the culture sector, was addressed. Participants were presented with the marketing material of the many entities, for-profit and not-for-profit, that offer voluntourism opportunities and experiences. As can be expected, the marketing material and images present voluntourism as a win-win situation for both the host communities where their well-intentioned activities would take place and the individuals and groups signing up for the experiences. Increasingly however, it can be observed, that voluntourism experiences, particularly those that involve direct interaction with often vulnerable local populations, and particularly children, are doing more harm than good. So much in fact, that the Australian Government has taken steps to render illegal such activities under the introduction of a *Modern Slavery Act*⁵, and some travel companies, after careful consideration of the evidence, have stopped providing such experiences.

Voluntourism experiences are sold in two ways. They can be sold as a complete holiday packages in advance of travel or alternatively as stand-alone experiences arranged in-situ, once people are in a particular location on their ongoing holiday. Motivations to take up these opportunities vary, but a common feature is a genuine desire to ‘do some good’ and/or obtain a genuine connection with the local host-community. The idea that undertaking ‘volunteering’ experiences while on holiday is a way to mitigate any negative impact that holiday-makers might have on the local environment or people is being embraced by NGOs and tourism companies alike.

3 CEV Policy Statements on Volunteering issues in Europe , European Volunteer Centre, https://issuu.com/european_volunteer_centre/docs/cev_policy_statements_on_volunteeri , Last seen September 10th 2018.

4 Wanda Alarcon Ferraguto, “Voluntourism: A Critical Evaluation And Recommendations For The Future”, European Volunteer Centre, August 2018, https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/3ec99c_efabd5cd5c05481abf080710243748b.pdf, Last seen September 10th 2018.

5 Reccomendation for Modern Slavery Act, “Orphanage Trafficking” Section, Australian Parliament, https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Foreign_Affairs_Defence_and_Trade/Modern_Slavery/Final_report/section?id=committees%2Freportjnt%2F024102%2F25036 , Last seen September 10th 2018.

However, there are a number of questions that must be asked about this approach of linking the concept of volunteering and, by extension, solidarity, with the objectives tourism companies and agencies and the tourists themselves.

4. Conclusion

After hearing about the situation of the global business of ‘voluntourism’ in general, and a specific example of voluntourism in the field of cultural heritage from Croatia, the workshop participants were invited to share their degree of agreement or disagreement with a number of statements and explain their reasoning.

When asked *if voluntourism is ok in any sector?*, the responses generally tended towards no, with particular reference made by a number of participants about the concerns around volunteering with children and other vulnerable groups in institutional settings. Evidence about the long-term damage being made, in particular to children, a cause that is championed by the author JK Rowling:

“#Voluntourism is one of drivers of family break up in very poor countries. It incentivises ‘orphanages’ that are run as businesses”,

and organisations such as VSO:

“We recognise the valuable and compelling academic research that demonstrates the detrimental impacts that volunteer contact can have on institutionalised children, which is why VSO will not support such placements. [...] VSO strongly backs JK Rowling’s views on this issue and we are ready to work with all organisations to ensure that orphanage trips are consigned to history”⁶.

Participants also discussed *if its ok to pay fees for volunteering experiences?* The responses were split with some participants expressing a reluctance to ‘marketise’ volunteering in this way. Others recognised the valuable contribution that such fees can make to an organisation’s running costs and ongoing ability to take actions to achieve their objectives for societal good.

In response to the question *if there should be more “voluntourism”?* an overwhelming majority of participants felt that there shouldn’t be. It was emphasised that encouragement should be given to seeking a change of name for the phenomenon such as ‘active tourism’ or ‘engagement tourism’ with a view to removing as much as possible the link to volunteering from the kind of experiences that tourists are seeking in this context. Arguments for this centred around the business approach of voluntourism and also the juxtaposition of the general principles of volunteering

⁶ Oppenheim M., “JK Rowling condemns ‘voluntourism’ and highlights dangers of volunteering in orphanages overseas”, The Independent, August 23rd 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/jk-rowling-twitter-voluntourism-volunteering-in-orphanages-risks-a7204801.html>, Last seen September 10th 2018.

being centred around selfless giving and those of tourism focussing on personal gain and satisfaction.

A smaller number however did feel that more voluntourism can be good for local economies, for the sustainability of NGOs, and for local environments in general. They thought that through voluntourism experiences tourists would become more sensitive to local issues and become more aware of their impact on the local communities, cultural heritage sites and environments in general, whilst on holiday. The idea that this could also extend in relation to their everyday lifestyles as concerns for example respect for cultural heritage or their use of single-use plastics or energy was also shared.

Concerning the question as to *whether volunteer centres and organisations should develop guidelines and quality standards for ‘voluntourism’?* there were also mixed conclusions. From the participants who expressed a wish to reverse the growing use of the term ‘voluntourism’, and disassociate volunteering from tourism, there was the clear opinion that quality standards should not be developed by the volunteering sector as this would be tantamount to endorsement of the concept. The general belief of the group however was that clearer guidelines could be developed that would be useful for individuals, tour operators, tourism companies and volunteering organisations and infrastructure bodies, in addition to policymakers. This would provide a big contribution to ensuring that no damage is being caused to either individuals or to the principles and intrinsic values of volunteering that are central to our communities and society. The guidelines could include aspects such as clarity and transparency about who is getting paid, for what, and who is making any profit; who’s needs are primarily being met; does the experience have the potential to lead to further, longer term engagement in volunteering initiatives with a higher potential for real impact?

Finally, on the question as to *whether ‘Voluntourism’ can help to protect cultural heritage?* the participants were in general agreement that this could be the case but only if certain conditions were met. The central wish was that as few resources as possible were diverted to tourism companies and tour operators and that the not-for-profit organisations, NGOs and state-run institutions seeking to conserve and protect cultural heritage should be the main beneficiaries of the time and resources that tourists are willing to dedicate to such objectives. In addition, that an educational aspect should be part of any experience being offered. In this way, sustaining the overall impact over a longer period of time and bringing added value to the volunteers involved in terms of greater understanding and changes of attitudes around cultural heritage and the impact of tourism on this in particular. Capitalising on voluntourism experiences to gain more long-term and regular volunteers in the culture sector was also cited as an important outcome and that this could be the biggest added value overall for ‘voluntourism’ in the culture sector.