Travel and Help

Volunteering abroad is increasingly becoming a touristic product. How does sustainable and responsible voluntourism look like? We spoke with Laura Jäger of Tourism Watch, a desk at Bread for the World.

Voluntourism, neologised from volunteering and tourism, is in vogue. Many young adults combine a trip abroad with volunteering in the destination. What is it that motivates them?
It is to be welcomed that more and more people would like to look behind the touristic scenes and be actively engaged at the destination. In 2011, about ten million people worldwide travelled abroad as volunteers, including an increasing number of Germans. While people earlier used to organise their traineeships or trips mainly on their own or used to travel with youth groups, there are many touristic package offers available nowadays. The volunteers' motivations are manifold. Many young people make use of the time between their A-levels and university studies as a phase of orientation. They feel the pressure of having to provide evidence of their language skills and international experience, and social commitment is also an asset in their CVs. However, the people interested in voluntourism offers also include an increasing number of employed people on a sabbatical, and senior citizens.

Generally, we need to differentiate between legally regulated volunteer services and commercial players.
Regulated volunteer services are supported by the government and are subject to certain conditions and quality criteria, such as a long term stay of six to 24 months, and several weeks of preparation and follow-up. In 2016, nearly 7,700 Germans took part in government funded volunteering abroad. The number of those travelling on voluntourism packages is much higher, the time frame during which people work abroad is usually much shorter, and these offers promise a high degree of adventure and experience. They include are all kinds of imaginable forms of travel: People may help out at an orphanage spontaneously for a day, support a species conservation project for two weeks after a round trip, or work in a social project for several months. The offers mainly cater to the needs of the paying customers. We are observing an increasing commercialisation in this area. Voluntourism has become a lucrative economic factor worldwide, with annual turnovers amounting to billions.

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And it has become subject to criticism. Commercial players make a lot of money from volunteering – while the benefits are often questionable.
Many companies market their trips using clichés that are questionable from a development point of view, portraying volunteers as active people improving the world, and local people as grateful but passive recipients of help. Hardly any voluntourism operator checks whether the voluntourists actually have the motivation and necessary qualification to contribute to local projects in meaningful ways. Preparation courses are often offered only against payment, are often too short and hardly ever mandatory for the volunteer services to follow. When projects primarily cater to the interests of the paying customers, the receiving local organisations become touristic service providers and local people part of the setting. Partnerships on equal terms and joint learning are not possible in this way. In the worst case, voluntourism does not only help very little, it may also do damage. Voluntourists who pay to work are often in competition with local people seeking employment.

“Orphanage tourism“ is also under criticism. Why?
Studies, for example from Cambodia, show that many of the supposed orphans actually do have one or both parents still alive and are forced to grow up away from their families. Unscrupulous human traffickers exploit the tourists’ wish to help and persuade families in economic distress to send their children to an orphanage, hoping for a better life. Children in orphanages often suffer from bonding disorders, as volunteers only stay for a short time and the children keep losing their attachment figures. Tourism Watch therefore strongly discourages voluntourism in orphanages.

What aspects must be considered in kindergarten and school projects?
The work with children and adolescents requires particular diligence. In general, the longer the time of stay, the more previous experience, training in pedagogics, and language skills volunteers have, the better will they be able to contribute. Voluntourists should not assume independent teaching or caring responsibilities, but should limit their engagement to supporting the permanent staff. In many projects or home stays, various situations emerge in which voluntourists are alone with children. This potentially entails an increased danger of children becoming victims of sexual violence. Commercial providers should therefore have preventive strategies in place and implement measures to protect children – including a binding agreement on how volunteers should behave with children. In addition, police clearance certificates should be requested from applicants in order to find out whether they had previous criminal records.

How can we identify sustainable and responsible offers?

In voluntourism, the same sustainability criteria apply that also apply to other forms of tourism – starting with air travel. In addition, there are some particularities. In 2015, the organisation “Fair Trade Tourism“ in South Africa added criteria for responsible voluntourism to their standards. Apart from a child protection policy, this also includes a careful selection and intensive preparation of volunteers and a fair cooperation with local organisations. In Germany, there are no certified voluntourism operators to date that subscribe to certain minimum standards and get audited by independent auditors. We therefore advise people who are interested in such offers to ask questions. What kind of activities does the tour operator pursue to actively contribute to improving the situation in the host country? Does the cooperation with local organisations take place on equal terms? To what extent is the local organisation involved in designing the jobs of volunteers? A good operator also transparently shows the percentage of the package price that goes to the receiving organisation.

In which ways can volunteers contribute to the success of their volunteering efforts?

I would like to encourage travellers to realistically assess their own skills and expectations, but also the time available. As a guiding principle, volunteers may use as an orientation whether they would be sufficiently qualified to successfully take up a similar job in Germany. People going abroad without much experience should stay as long as possible and are well-advised to use a regulated volunteering service. In such cases, it is mainly mutual exchange and global learning that play a primary role.

Should many volunteers give up the idea of going to save the world?

Voluntourism is not to be equated with development cooperation. In order to improve the living conditions of local people and initiate social transformation, long-term strategies and expertise are needed. Voluntourists should therefore say goodbye to overly high expectations. But still, even a short-term volunteering experience can be very enriching. Abroad, participants not only learn a lot about other cultures, but also about themselves. After volunteering, they will have a better understanding of global contexts – for example of the impacts of their own consumption patterns. This is an important change of perspective. Voluntourists get a chance to gather experiences abroad that will change the way they see the world.

About Laura Jäger: *Laura Jäger studied tourism and event management (B.A.) and geography (environment, culture, and tourism, M.A.). At Tourism Watch she is in charge of coordinating projects, communication, and networks.*

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