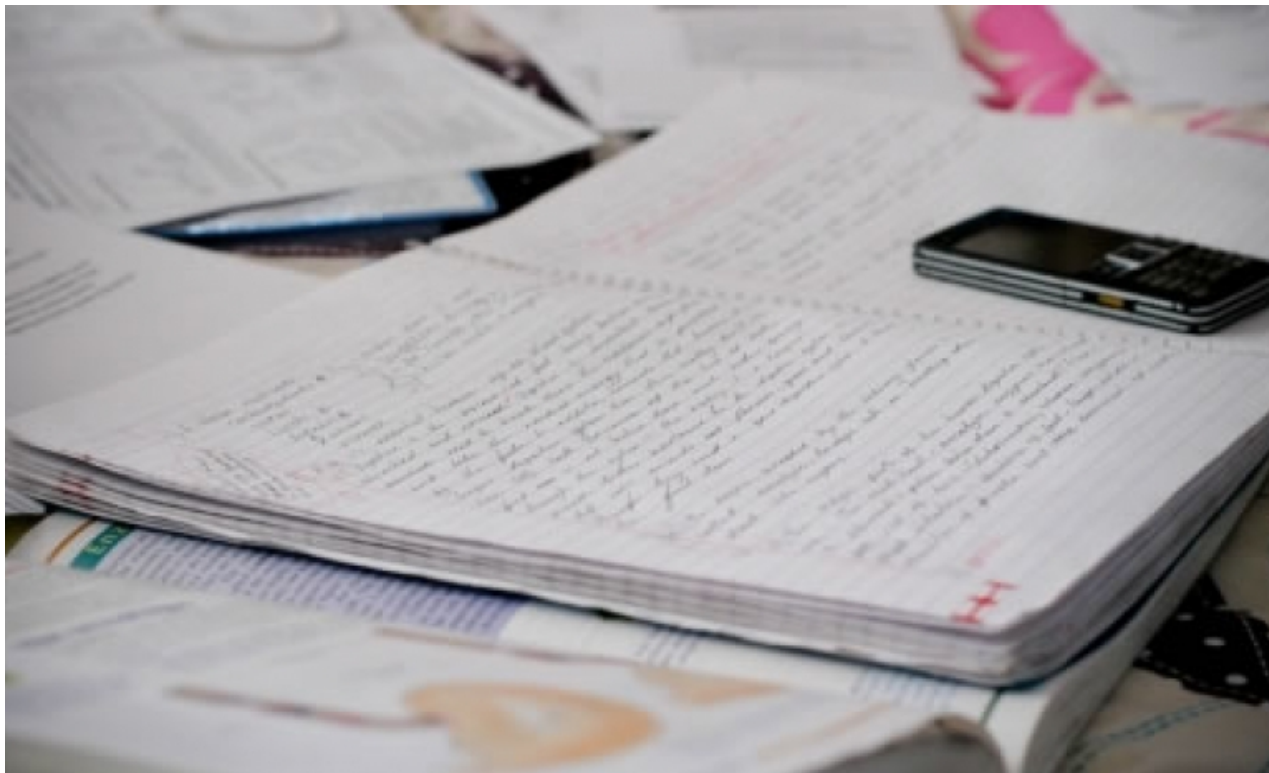


'Voluntourism': love for the other or love for oneself



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Every year thousands of people from rich countries travel to poor countries in search of a solidary vacation. They want to make a difference, be part of social change and make a contribution to the welfare of humanity, and that desire is exploited by the market in the form of tourism volunteerism or voluntourism.

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Different companies and organizations offer tempting offers on their web pages: Main destinations for a dreamy solidary holiday or trips that change lives. **International volunteering has been changing over time and is not a novelty.** In the past they were related to religious missions, with the recovery of countries affected by wars and with the independence processes of the colonies. With the beginning of post-war international cooperation, we began to talk about sustainable development and to promote volunteering that would favor the growth of the countries of the South.

Some indicate that the formula of "responsible holidays" arises in response to the famous resorts of the 90s that offered tourist packages within protected havens far from reality and the authenticity of the local. **I am currently the director of a development cooperation organization in India,** a popular country in the West for its alternative medicines, Ayurvedic therapy, yoga practices and gurus such as Osho or Ravi Shankar. India is admired for its culture linked to spirituality and religion and a millionaire market has been created around it. **Many people find in these therapies a way of living life** and most of the users are women, which is not casual if we look at the stereotype of women as protective, sensitive and spiritual.

Many women come to the organization with the intention of volunteering with children in situations of poverty and vulnerability. When I ask them what is the reason for volunteering in India, the answers are, in general, very similar: **"because I am looking for a transformative experience", "because my dream is to go to India", "because I want to grow personally"**. Although the impulse is one of great generosity, it always has to do with themselves and with the experience of special personal experiences. They do not want to change the world, or at least, it is not what leads them to take the initiative.

It is a journey of self-realization, centered on their own enjoyment and well-being and not on the development and growth of the community. They are passionate about the idea of India, without training or experience to work with children, much less in situations of social exclusion. **They believe that anything they do to "help" will be good for people in India. This fashion, within reach of the upper and middle classes of developed countries, is a kind of therapy** to return what welfare states have given them, have a mobilizing experience, atone consciences and upload many photos to tell.

The egocentrism and individualism behind this search are typical of ideals exactly opposed to solidarity, whose inspiration is empathy and service. Under the neoliberal ideal of consumption, a lucrative but "responsible" activity is built and the people who genuinely have the will to collaborate pay thousands of euros in exchange for being able to show their generosity. When the volunteers return from the trip to India to their countries of origin, there are two stages. One of evaluation and the other of loyalty, so that they continue collaborating with the organization. Both things are difficult. They already had their personal experience and that passion for helping others is behind us.

In the reports, it is very common to see the following phrases: "the children are beautiful, they have nothing and yet they are happy and smiling", "it has been an incredible experience and it has made me very happy". What did this volunteering bring to the children who would be helped? The life of the one who returns continues and his feeling is of having grown personally, of full individual satisfaction and they want to show what they experienced. It is interesting to note that in all the opportunities it was necessary to request the deletion of photos of social networks with children who, in many cases, have complex family situations and open judicial procedures.

The right to privacy and privacy of a child of a poor country is not taken seriously or valued as important. Say that children who live in extreme poverty and surrounded by misery "are happy and smile" shows that empathy does not develop while traveling and reveals a deep disconnection with reality. If the desire is to continue collaborating economically with the organization, **they do not want to give their money for projects in general, they want to sponsor a particular child. They want a photo of that boy or girl every year** to see their evolution and know what they are paying for. The desire is to end poverty and injustice but also to possess. They want to give their money "disinterestedly" in exchange for an individual reward.

The truth is that voluntourism brings more complications than benefits, starting with the fact that it promotes the treatment of people in vulnerable situations as if they were goods that can be enjoyed in exchange for money to have a personal experience. In turn, this activity perpetuates colonialist stereotypes where whites from developed and knowledgeable countries have the power to go to a community to do jobs and activities for which local people could collect a salary. And this is sustained by the shelter of a patriarchal and capitalist

structure that allows people to pay to live with poverty for a season to have a fascinating experience.

The voluntarism industry moves millions and I fear that companies are far from promoting the true and lasting development of communities, basically because it would leave them without business. **Voluntourism is an industry that takes advantage of the failures of humanity** to earn a lot of money, and social injustices are used so that people who seek a personal experience can portray themselves as good, supportive and committed. It is proven that individual help does not change the world or save anyone, in part this is one of the reasons why organizations and movements are created to promote social development in a systematic, professional and long-term way.

My proposal is that before anyone considers the possibility of volunteering in solidarity, think about whether it is better to help in your own country and on your vacations simply to travel. If what they want is to help, which is fantastic, **a good idea could be to help the neighboring immigrants from the countries oppressed by the West to learn the language** or find out how to lend a hand to do the procedures that allow them to have a legal residence in Europe or find a stable job.

Thousands of grandparents and abandoned grandmothers need company, you can go to chat with them and give a break to their loneliness. And, on vacation, travel. Simply go through the places you want with respect, care and responsibility. **Traveling is a great possibility that gives us the current society and one of the most friendly consequences of globalization.** In this way we will favor the growth of the local economies of the countries that dazzle us and we will be able to find wonderful and enriching cultural experiences.

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