Is overseas volunteering 'the new colonialism'?  
An analysis of benefits

Bosco Volunteer Action (UK)
Outline

• Aims
• Context of volunteering
• Current situation
• Criticisms and counter criticisms
• A method of analysing benefits
• Towards positive outcomes for all
• Educational theories
• Conclusions – what does this mean for you?
Aims

• To consider some of the criticisms faced by overseas volunteering
• To suggest a method of analysing the benefits for the different actors involved
• To propose a number of possible ways to make it beneficial for all
## Context

### Working overseas
- Missionaries (including students, doctors etc.)
- Professionals (VSO etc.)
- ‘Gap year’/volunteer projects

### Travel
- Pilgrimage
- Grand Tour
- Back-packers/travellers
- Service learning (USA)
- Alternative- and eco-tourism

### National Service / national youth service, sometimes as an alternative to military service
The gap year, and volunteering in particular, has become mainstreamed in the UK – between 60 and 350 thousand a year (2010)!. It has been encouraged by the government and universities. Both Prince William and Prince Harry took part in gap year volunteer projects in the developing world.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| “Professional” volunteering (e.g. VSO, Progressio) | • Longer term placements (1-2 years) with training  
• Volunteers have work experience  
• Volunteers paid by organisation |
| Gap Year volunteering organisations/companies (e.g. Raleigh International, i-to-i) | • Short term, limited training  
• Inexperienced volunteers  
• Volunteers pay to take part |
Criticisms …

- VSO accuse volunteering of being the “new colonialism” (2006)
- Horror stories about inappropriate behaviour and work by volunteers
- Nothing but “enhanced” tourism? (Simpson 2004, p55)
- Gap “refers to the empty space between the ears of over privileged teenagers. Or the chasm between materialistic students dripping with iPods and the impoverished subjects of their misguided charity.” (Guardian 2006)
... and counter criticisms

- Use of emotive language; is it correct that “anyone with youthful zest for "helping" should be made to feel like a mustachio-twirling, cane-swishing, savage-taming colonialist”? (Guardian 16/8/2006)
- VSO volunteers as neo-colonialists? (Roberts 2004, p46)
  - Majority white - Salvation from the outside
  - DFID funding - Professional status

Imperfect, but based on skill-sharing, on-going support and excellent training.

Gap year and less comprehensive volunteer projects can certainly be exploitative.
A method of analysis – Who benefits?

Volunteer:
• Profits financially (or receives value for money)
• Personal growth/ global education
• CV experience
• “Enhanced tourism” experience
• Fun(?)

Host:
• Financial gain (or not loss)
• Skills/experience gain
• Work carried out

Sending Organisation:
• Financial gain (if ‘for profit’)
• Longer term gains (in terms of continued involvement/relationship)

Best situation – all actors win
A method of analysis – Who benefits?

Sending Organisation Wins

Volunteer:
• Financial loss (or does not receive value for money)
• Limited or no personal growth/global education or useful experience

Host:
• Financial loss (volunteer a drain)
• No work or experience gained

Sending Organisation:
• Financial gain
Towards positive outcomes for all

- Standards for sending organisations (Tourism Concern and Comhlámh)
- The host’s voice – expectations and understandings of reasons for accepting volunteers
- Realistic expectations for volunteers
- An educational approach

Simpson argues that “any meaningful social agenda or attempt to engage with global awareness necessitates a pedagogy based on social justice” (2004, p1).

- Experiential Education
- Social Justice Education
Educational Theories

Experiential Education (1930s)
- Originally involved having theories to test and reflection
- Became over-simplified; “let the mountains speak for themselves”
- “It is the reflection process which turns experience into experiential education” (Joplin 1981, p18)

Social Justice Education
- Education linked to action (Freire)
- Three stages (Wade):
  - Personal experience
  - Critical reflection
  - Action
Conclusions

We have seen that:

• Overseas volunteering must be understood within a particular historical and cultural context
• It is in the mainstream; has become institutionally acceptable
• It can take unfair advantage of both the developing world and volunteers
• There are a number of possible ways to reduce this exploitation and make it beneficial for all
So what does this mean for you?

• Needs to be an educational experience
  – How to do this?
• Needs to be a stimulus/gateway to continued involvement

• Your reactions
  – Is it fair?
  – Were you aware of these issues?
  – Long term commitment?
References


Websites
Guardian Online [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk)
VSO [www.vso.org.uk](http://www.vso.org.uk)
Tourism Concern [www.tourismconcern.org.uk](http://www.tourismconcern.org.uk)
Comhlámh's volunteering options [www.volunteeringoptions.org](http://www.volunteeringoptions.org)
Gap year research [www.gapyearresearch.org](http://www.gapyearresearch.org)