



Voluntourism: More tourist than volunteer

*By Tion Kwa*

A growing number of people from Singapore, it seems, have been signing up to spend their hard-earned holiday time doing tough work for charities in difficult places. If you haven't heard, this new niche in vacation travel is called "voluntourism".

The pitch is simple. Instead of two weeks sipping wine somewhere comfortable, somewhere scenic, put your money to better use and volunteer your labour to a Third World charity or an aid agency. The idea oozes with virtue. And when something sounds so good, I get bothered. For one thing, I have to wonder what real value volunteer tourists offer their hosts.

The cynic in me suspects that these short-times take home more from their slumming in the Third World than leave behind for the underprivileged they are supposed to help. There are the photographs with those unfortunate enough to have been born in the wrong place. There is the cleansing of developed-world middle-class guilt. There might even be the opportunity to use the experience on a college application or job resume.

On the other side, I imagine, the charities and aid agencies must play host to a revolving number of people who never stay long enough to make any difference – and who might even complicate matters because of their lack of experience.

If you're new to rural – anywhere, village life in Cambodia or Malawi or Mongolia is going to take a lot of getting used to. So the charities have to put up with volunteers being inept at first. Then, they have to ensure the volunteers are up to the mark for the work they've signed up for.

But two weeks go by pretty fast. In no time at all, then, the volunteers are saying their goodbyes – so, as soon as they've arrived to do good for the wretched of the earth, the tourists are just as quickly out of there. The poor remain, on the other hand, stuck with their patch of dirt. Symmetry is restored; nothing changes. Except for the volunteers who can count on dining out on their experience.

I'm no handyman, but I've spent enough time with my father-in-law to know a thing or two about hammers and saws. Enough anyway to know that it's a pretty steep curve learning all the bit you need to build a house, school, toilet, or whatever it is voluntourists do. So I have to wonder how much use they are, especially people more likely to call in the locksmith for the broken door than to try to fix it themselves.

Okay, maybe volunteers do less challenging jobs, like painting. Since almost anyone can paint, why do you need someone from Singapore or New York to, say, go paint a clinic in Nicaragua?

What's particularly galling about voluntourism is the vanity that people from developed countries naturally have something to teach the poor. There's a smug superiority, lurking in the back, wrapped up in the notion that anyone from a rich nation willing to pay for the trip can teach the underprivileged of the Third World how to live their lives.



## S4 AQ Practice 2014 - Voluntourism

Certainly, you can't fault the charities for being complicit in volunteer tourism. The exposure they get can help with raising funds in the future. Perhaps they're willing to put up with the interruption in their work and the hassle for this. But if you care enough for a cause or charity, why not just give your money outright instead of making the charity put up with you?

The thing is to be useful. So if you want to help, there are prudent and effective ways to go about it. But importantly, don't get in the way. Send them your money if you care. Just don't get in their way.

### Application Question

**To what extent do you agree with the author's assessment of what he terms 'voluntourism'? Do you think Singaporeans are guilty of volunteering with flawed intentions? Discuss the relevance of the arguments presented to you and your society.**

**Refer to specific material from the passage as well as your own knowledge and opinions in your answer.**