

## Saving the World, Barbie Style

“Barbie Savior” is a popular Instagram account that features satirical, photoshopped images of a Barbie doll traveling the world and taking selfies with the disadvantaged—those in poverty, those affected by disaster, orphans, etc. With over 160,000 followers on Instagram, “Barbie Savior” is a satirical representation of growing concern over the multibillion dollar so-called “voluntourism” industry.<sup>1</sup> The captions from Barbie Savior are often comically self-directed and seek to highlight how volunteer work abroad, if not engaged in carefully, can be superficial, empty, and even harmful.

Every year, over 1.6 million people volunteer abroad, usually with good intentions of helping out in underserved communities.<sup>2</sup> However, critics of voluntourism point out that the damage done to communities can quickly outweigh the benefits. Volunteers who are untrained or unspecialized in building, for instance, may produce unsafe, shoddy work that will have to be taken down and rebuilt by locals. Additionally, if there is no shortage of locals who are able and willing to work, bringing in foreign volunteers can displace local jobs. To make things worse, not all volunteer aid organizations do have the best intentions, and may exploit rather than help local communities. One orphanage in Cambodia, for example, forced children to toil in rice paddies and beat and starved them, all while pocketing charitable donations.<sup>3</sup> While many aid organizations are not comparably fraudulent or corrupt, critics contend that voluntourism can support an unsustainable and repressive dependence on Western nations which enforces racialized hierarchies and stereotypes without providing longer-term solutions that empower the communities being served.

Despite some possible pitfalls, volunteering abroad does have the potential to provide needed, powerful, and lasting benefits to both the community and the volunteer. Proponents insist that, if operated as a mutual exchange of knowledge, skills, and resources, development projects can make lasting and meaningful change in communities where it is needed. For example, non-profits that place locals in charge of projects and partner with existing community organizations emphasize a “bottom-up” approach that focuses on empowerment and building self-sustaining, resilient programs, rather than merely providing short-term resource handouts. Respecting local culture and customs and recognizing that local people understand their own needs, barriers, and capabilities best are key to performing work ethically, aid organizations argue. In this way, travelers can avoid having the “savior” mentality satirized above—where they assume that they know more or have more skills just by virtue of coming from a more developed country. Instead, volunteers can use this opportunity to listen and learn, to form deep connections with the local people, and to grow their senses of empathy and compassion that will hopefully lead to more selfless acts in the future.

Others worry, however, that discouraging or regulating voluntourism may end up doing more harm than good because volunteers, at the very least, bring money and attention to notable causes. For instance, FORGE, a charity for refugees, shifted away from volunteers towards a model designed to help people more effectively. However, their income fell drastically because volunteers were their primary fundraisers.<sup>4</sup> Despite critiques that voluntourism focuses too much on the volunteers’ experience rather than the impact and effectiveness of their programs, it may be the reality that volunteers, even “bad” ones, are vital for some organizations to do their work in the first place.

### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What factors should individuals consider when deciding whether to engage in volunteer work abroad?
2. Can intentions be morally good if they are also self-serving? Why or why not?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://qz.com/africa/665764/instagrams-white-savior-barbie-neatly-captures-whats-wrong-with-voluntourism-in-africa/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.savethechildren.org.au/Our-Stories/The-truth-about-voluntourism>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/19/the-race-to-rescue-cambodian-children-from-orphanages-exploiting-them-for-profit>

<sup>4</sup> <https://80000hours.org/2012/10/how-to-be-a-high-impact-volunteer/>

