Voluntourism and the Contract Corrective

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Critiques of the voluntourism industry focus on power imbalances, colonial legacies, and white privilege. Drawing on the literatures of development and voluntourism to find points of comparison, we argue that the voluntourism industry reflects myriad development problems, such as structural challenges, the fungibility of aid, corruption, representation, worker narratives, and temporality. We assert that many of the problems inherent in voluntourism could be remedied by the evolution of a contract norm between volunteers and their local partners, where reciprocity and transparency might practically serve as a corrective to voluntourism's most entrenched problems.

Keywords: voluntourism; volunteer tourism; contract norm; development; reciprocity

Introduction

Critiques of development are widespread, and focus both on specific implementation challenges as well as programmes' lack of success in enacting structural reform in recipient communities. Development workers themselves are of course not immune from criticism, and even well-seasoned, well-meaning, and experienced workers have come under fire for failing to appropriately respond to the needs of the communities they intend to serve. Concerns about the contributions of individuals in the development sector are magnified when the workers are volunteers with little or no formal training who deliver their assistance in short-term stints. This issue was lampooned in a 28 January 2014 article from the satirical newspaper, *The Onion*, whose headline reads: "6-Day Visit To Rural African Village Completely Changes Woman's Facebook Profile Picture."

The Onion's fictional volunteer reflects the growing problems associated with the voluntourism industry, which we define broadly as *assistance rendered to local people by tourists who stay in local communities for less than one year*.[1] As humorous as *The Onion*'s story may be, its patina of levity only reinforces that voluntourism can be, and demonstrably

has been, a problematic and destructive enterprise. It is also not an insignificant one. In a 2008 study, Tourism Research and Marketing, an independent British consultancy, found that approximately 1.6 million individuals volunteer overseas each year, and that the industry is worth USD2.6 billion.[2] From the US alone, it has been estimated that colleges and universities send over 6,000 students abroad every year for volunteer trips,[3] while church groups sponsor around 1.6 million service trips annually.[4] A 2007 Mintel study found that volunteer abroad projects account for 10 per cent of the UK's annual outbound tourism expenditure.[5] This unprecedented circulation of volunteers, resources, and ideas seemingly materialized overnight. According to David Clemmons, the founder of voluntourism.org, a google search of the term 'voluntourism' returned zero hits in 2000, and over 300,000 hits in 2010.[6] The deluge has encouraged a correspondingly respectable body of academic and social comment and criticism. There are now approximately 550 articles and at least five books on the subject, along with a ream of articles in print and online media.[7]

We argue that many of the problems inherent in voluntourism – which we detail below – could be remedied by the evolution of a contract norm between volunteers and their local partners, which, practically speaking, would involve the widespread adoption of contracts or agreements, which could take any number of forms. They could closely resemble a written contract familiar to many in the Global North, or simply emerge from the oral negotiations between a volunteer and local partner that precede the voluntourism experience. Form though, is ultimately irrelevant. What is important is that the contract or agreement sets out what both parties desire from and are willing to give to the exchange, and that these elements are genuinely discussed and considered before the exchange begins. In doing so, such an agreement would be true to the spirit of negotiation and reciprocity that underpins any contract, a legal term whose etymology is instructive. From the Latin *contrahere*, the word contract classically meant 'to bind together'. This concept of binding together, of constructing a

mutually beneficial relationship that turns actual and acknowledged desires into obligations, is behind the idea of a contract norm and has, we submit, the potential to transform and positively redefine voluntourism.

In the coming pages, we review the current literature on voluntourism, noting early observations and continuing critiques. We then draw on the development literature to locate several overlapping problems: structural challenges; the fungibility of aid; corruption; representation; worker narratives; and temporality. We then focus on how a contract or agreement (and attendant pre-negotiations) would create a reciprocal arrangement that benefits both the volunteer and the local partner. We then suggest a number of elements that could potentially be included, and apply concepts from development to demonstrate how these elements would in practice help mitigate some of voluntourism's most entrenched problems. We conclude with an acknowledgement of some of the unanswered questions that will inevitably arise from our suggestions.

Interrogating voluntourism

Early scholarship on voluntourism argued that voluntourism had an overall positive effect on both the tourist and host communities.[8] Over time, the validity of these conclusions has been questioned as the incidence of voluntourism has increased, its practice commercialized and impacts more widely felt.[9] In the last few years, this debate has become increasingly polarized as both the ethics and efficacy of voluntourism have been called into question.[10] It has also been compounded by many of the challenges voluntourism itself faces. Not unexpectedly, it has been noted that the study of voluntourism is directed substantially, if not quite exclusively, from the perspective of the voluntourist and not the local host, which distorts the lens of the critic and perpetuates many of the problems discussed below.[11]

Much like the broader critiques contained in the development literature and in critical development studies,[12] many of the critiques of voluntourism focus on power imbalances,

colonial legacies, and structural white privilege. Ninety per cent of voluntourism takes place in Latin America, Asia, and Africa.[13] The industry therefore represents a contact zone where global polarities converge and volunteer sites become 'places for viewing the "Other" rather than spaces of interaction.'[14] In this exchange, the 'Other' is subordinated by patterns of systemic domination while the volunteer tourist is 'enlarged or expanded, challenged, renewed or reinforced by the experience.'[15] Accordingly, the soft global citizenship ideal at the heart of voluntourism can degenerate into a 'new civilizing mission' that validates the privilege of the voluntourist.[16] While it is certainly not true of all, according to Sin many voluntourists are 'more interested in fulfilling objectives relating to the "self" than the community' they are there ostensibly to assist.[17]

The mechanics of voluntourism have also come under attack, with criticism centering on, amongst others, the neglect of local desires and customs, lack of skilled volunteers, promotion of cultural misunderstanding, unsatisfactory and incomplete work, devaluation of local knowledge, promotion of dependency, distortion of local economies, and implicit encouragement of host self-sanitization.[18] Also worrying is the impact commercial voluntourism operators have on the communities touched by voluntourism. Alarmingly, it has been demonstrated that amongst some commercial voluntourism operators there exists an inverse relationship between profit and responsibility, whereby the operators who charge the most fall the furthest short of voluntourism's ostensible ethic – the goodwill of doing well while doing good.[19]

The conceptualization of reflexive volunteering, which recognizes the volunteer as an agentic and individual actor, has been used to criticize the introverted values and short-term motivations of many volunteers and their projects.[20] As an enterprise, voluntourism has been censured over claims it encourages self-serving and irresponsible volunteering, fails to bridge the empathy gap, and reinforces negative, potentially even racist, stereotypes.[21] Further, vol-

unteers who desire 'unmediated contact' with 'traditional' communities reveal assumptions implicit in volunteer-host relationships and the need to think responsibly about such contact zones.[22]

Reflecting analyses in critical development studies, the commodification and commercialization of voluntourism have also come under attack, increasingly viewed as either a product or manifestation of neoliberalism. On an industry level, it has been argued that a neoliberal development model, which replaces disempowered state-based actors with unaccountable, profit-driven private institutions, has played a role in the rise and debasement of voluntourism.[23] McGloin and Georgou argue that 'voluntourism fits neatly with neoliberal ideology; it is run by private organisations and corporations, and appeals to the individual sense of "goodness" articulated through the broader discourse of liberal human rights'.[24] On an individual level, the influence of market forces on voluntourism has linked the phenomenon to the 'affective economy' or 'moral market', which, through its appeal to emotion, problematically reduces complex issues of structural injustice to questions of individual morality that can be solved simply, even by celebrity star power.[25] In a similar vein of criticism, it has been asserted that volunteers are not necessarily driven by good-will and a can-do attitude, but are discerning consumers who carefully choose their field of activity and expect a fundamentally self-interested return on their investment, whether it be in the form of self-actualization, work experience, Facebook profile picture, or college reference.[26] One blunt assessment went as far as likening the voluntourism experience to an adornment on a university student's curriculum vitae; a precondition for obtaining that prized graduate job and boarding pass to the global economy.[27] In this way, and despite its potential to subvert neoliberalist values, voluntourism paradoxically risks undermining global citizenry.

Despite these many critiques, the positive implications identified by Wearing and McGehee have the potential to endure.[28] In an early piece, Wearing and Wearing enunciated

the possibilities of voluntourism: 'the power balance between tourist and hosts can be desta-bilized, cultural hegemony can be challenged and tourist spaces constructed for genuine ex-change which will benefit all the selves involved'.[29] Furthermore, it can enhance internation-al and 'cross-cultural understanding, tolerance-building, disabusing of stereotypes, the ex-change of values and the mutual benefits of a global citizenry'.[30] As argued, 'the relationship between the volunteer tourist and members of the community gives shape to a richer under-standing of the volunteer tourism experience where power relationships are equal, and the experience is more inclusive of the Other'.[31] But is it possible to create equal power relation-ships when, as Sin argues, the very construct of caring relationships across socio-spatial boundaries positions the carer as the privileged and powerful?[32]

In attempting to answer this question, voluntourism research has turned to identifying best-practice guidelines and prescribing alternative frameworks that ameliorate deficiencies in existing models. It has been suggested that voluntourism programmes should be pre-planned with the host community to provide an improved cultural immersion experience.[33] There has also been a tripartite focus on benefitting the community, facilitating the interac-tion between the volunteer and the community, and ensuring that programmes are developed as a learning process, rather than exclusively a travel experience.[34] Likewise, to enhance the learning experience, it has been recognized that voluntourism pedagogy must provide partici-pants time to reflect on their experience, both during and after.[35] Yet these proposals to miti-gate voluntourism's problems have provided few tangible, immediate and viable solutions to its ethical dilemmas. One increasingly popular remedy is accreditation, which would involve the creation of a regime similar to eco-tourism certification that establishes and enforces standards for industry participants.[36] While the logic behind eco-certification, whereby tour operators are incentivized to deliver 'greener' tours in compliance with certification stand-ards, may apply to organized forms of voluntourism, it is less useful for those who try to vol-

unteer individually. In addition, the data on whether eco-certification in fact benefits eco-tour operators (and hence incentivizes them to become certified) are sparse and contradictory.[37] As such, the accreditation panacea remains aspirational and inchoate. Until an unambiguous model is developed, this solution is undermined by unresolved issues regarding governance, funding, stakeholder involvement, consensus, agency, and representativeness.

We hope our approach is different; we seek to offer a tangible, albeit similarly imperfect and unfinished, solution. As we argue below, thinking about voluntourism as a reciprocal arrangement in need of a contract norm is a useful way forward.

Substance over form: negotiation and agreement

The imposition of a Western Style legal contract onto the volunteer-host relationship has the potential to be deeply problematic. It is self-evident that such a legal contract could be used as an instrument of oppression and, if overly rigid, prescriptive or imposed, perpetuate the structural inequalities currently criticized in the literatures of voluntourism and critical development studies.[38] For these principal reasons, we do not advocate for the imposition of a binding, legally enforceable contract in voluntourism praxis. Instead, our argument is that the adoption of a 'soft', that is, legally non-binding, contract or agreement, inspired and informed by genuine reflection and negotiation, could transcend many of the problems confronting voluntourism and have a positive multiplier effect that extends far beyond the bi- or multi-lateral exchange in which the bargain is grounded. The spirit, but not necessarily the form, of a Western-style legal contract is where we locate a potential solution. We also note that psychological contracts have been suggested as a way to mitigate the potential imbalances in research volunteer relationships. Psychological contracts recognize the importance of implicit obligations and reciprocal mutuality in understanding and managing expectations in complex exchanges.[39] Blackman and Benson argue that part of the value of the psychological contract is that it differentiates between the obligations and expectations of research volunteer tourists

as researchers/volunteers and as tourists.[40] They conclude that 'any emerging or indeed existing, tourism niche that is culturally or environmentally sensitive is likely to have customer expectations that could be better understood by applying a psychological contract approach'.[41]

Building on this analysis, and on the call for 'negotiation, disagreement and consensus building'[42] in the context of voluntourism, we argue that an agreement based on discussions involving concepts of obligation and reciprocity will have a positive impact for both volunteers and local partners. We also emphasize that the process of negotiating the agreement is as important as the agreement itself. These antecedents are crucial for aligning expectations, acknowledging agency, debunking narratives of disempowerment and laying the foundations for an exchange that hopefully confronts and overcomes historical and structural forces and potentially moves in the direction of equitability. As mentioned, voluntourism is a necessarily imbalanced site of exchange. It takes place where the material wealth of the Global North intersects with the poverty of the Global South. At present, all obligations, and indeed the nature of the entire enterprise, are informed by this asymmetry. Our proposal can remedy this imbalance by practically and psychologically giving agency to both partners, who are then considered just that: partners, understood to be acting in their best self-interests and neither in need of imperialistic rescue. In theory, this could obviate the paternalism of voluntourism and the us-and-them binary identified by Simpson, whereby volunteers imagine themselves as 'helpers' and the local partner as the 'helped', which positions the volunteer as the active agent who determines what the passive recipient needs, irrespective of their actual or professed needs.[43]

It is worth noting that legal contracts are already used in voluntourism, but typically not between the local partner and the volunteer. At the moment, voluntourism is largely a mediated practice. Colleges and universities, religious institutions, trade unions, charities, and

commercial operators conventionally act as interlocutor between the volunteer and the local partner. This interlocutor has a binding obligation to both the volunteer and possibly the local partner, and vice versa, but, aside from the psychological and normative obligations identified by Blackman and Benson, there is usually nothing that creates a personal obligation between the volunteer and the local partner. Our proposal bridges this disconnect. Through a contract or agreement, the volunteer is compelled to honour a personal commitment that exists independently, and possibly in the mind's eye even above, any arrangement with a placement organisation.

Perhaps controversially, we argue further that a tangible acknowledgement of the reciprocity of the relationship would nearly always create an imperative for the volunteer to donate money to the community, even if only a nominal amount, to acknowledge the time that the community has given to be with the volunteer, and the benefit that the volunteer gains from being there. We suggest that this amount of money be agreed upon in advance and spelled out clearly to align what may otherwise be mismatched expectations between the volunteer and the local partner.

The contract corrective

In this section we note how contracts or agreements could offer a corrective to voluntourism's various challenges. In doing so, we have identified a number of elements that could be included in the contract or agreement. Our list is by no-means exhaustive and entirely optional. As previously emphasized, it is essential that any agreement avoid prescription and is determined by the parties for their mutual benefit. Further, it is essential that the impulse towards a one-size-fits-all approach is aggressively repelled. With these imperatives firmly in mind, we suggest the following elements:

- a preamble/preliminary discussion that acknowledges power imbalances, agency and the need for reciprocity;

- specification of a transparent and identifiable sum of money that the volunteer will pay for time spent in the community;

- guidelines that suggest how any resources will be spent or distributed;

- identification of the intended beneficiaries of the volunteer's time and resources;

- identification of the media and form through which the volunteer can share their experiences;

- a list of possible ways that the volunteer can follow up after departure and, perhaps;

- if the contract or agreement is written, public posting of the agreement.

Drawing on development and related literatures, we have located several problems common to both voluntourism and development that could be remedied by these elements. To our mind, the development lens has much to offer voluntourism because it has been extensively scrutinized, contested and, in its multiplicity, honed, and is therefore well suited to the task of understanding and ameliorating the challenges that now confront voluntourism.

Structural challenges

Even the best-intentioned development programmes fail to fulfil their potential, and can be part of the problem, when they neglect systemic problems that undergird communities in need.[44] Despite decades of critique, NGOs delivering development aid continue to lack transformative potential, even when they use the 'civil society' moniker.[45] Programmes that deliver microfinance, for example, have the potential to perpetuate oppression on local levels.[46] Similarly, agriculture subsidies built around structural adjustment have destroyed self-sufficiency and responsible investment on national levels.[47] On the level encountered by the individual voluntourist, these very same forces are often at work. Volunteers who work in the fields with farmers for one day or teach English to students for one week typically fail to ad-

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dress or even acknowledge the systemic problems that lead to impoverishment and lack of education.[48]

One way this could be remedied would be to include a preamble that acknowledges the broader forces that maintain the socio-economic status quo. If a written agreement is impractical or undesired, a pre-exchange conversation about and verbal acknowledgment of these forces would similarly reframe the experience. Practically speaking, we suggest that a template could be adapted for different communities, regions and/or countries, and/or that the volunteer and local partner could work together to identify structural problems that affect the local partner and their community. The process of understanding some of the forces at work – be they more powerful players in the country, colonial legacies, foreign governments or multinational corporations – has the potential to improve the experience for all parties in terms of learning and acknowledgement.

Having identified systemic problems and some of its executors, an agreement could commit the volunteer to a follow up action that addresses structural issues, such as writing a letter to an offending party or doing an interview for the volunteer's hometown newspaper about the individual effects of a particular trade policy. Of course, these actions need not commit to effecting structural change. Instead, the action itself and the antecedent acknowledgement of systemic problems is what is important.

Targeting and fungibility of aid

On national, local and individual levels, donors have long chosen to give to recipients through targeted assistance, which, in theory, ensures that donations are exclusively used for approved activities or materials. Purchasing meals for the homeless to prevent them from buying drugs or distributing housing materials to communities to stop warlords from spending money on military arms are two examples of targeted assistance. What these programmes fail to address is that targeted assistance is often fungible – the donations in one area simply

free up money that would have been spent there and can now be spent on the item of the recipient's choosing.[49]

Rather than targeting assistance through the purchase of food or specific materials, we argue that the volunteer and local partner could discuss guidelines for how resources would be used in the community. Applying lessons from research that examined the fungibility of US overseas development aid targeted to combat HIV/AIDS, we suggest that a conversation be held about *saturation* and *capacity*.[50] That is, assistance should seek insufficiently funded projects that can be maintained by local partners. The voluntourist and local partner might agree that the money should go entirely to health items, specific ongoing care of a loved one or materials to rebuild a roof. The agreement might or might not provide for some follow-up – a local partner who plans to use the funds to go to school could promise to send a report card, for example – but in either case, the conversation at the outset would permit both parties to visualize the short and long term benefits of the volunteer exchange, thus facilitating commitment from both parties.

Contracts between volunteers and local partners would not eliminate the fungibility of aid. In fact, the infusion of hard currency could make the purchase of frowned-upon goods easier. Moreover, care must be taken to preserve the local partner's autonomy, knowledge and wishes for how the funds are best spent, as well as to avoid the subtle paternalism, if not out-right imperialism, that permeates tied-aid, assistance conditional upon structural reform and unfair project funding arrangements.[51] Nonetheless, we argue that the acknowledgement and discussion of these issues would inject transparency and authenticity into the process, while also shedding light on the actual professed needs of the local partner.

Bribery and corruption

There is a robust literature on the consequences of corruption in the Global South. Corruption's impact is felt at every spatial level. Globally, corruption has the potential to increase

the kinds of marginalization and indignity that fosters terrorism.[52] Nationally, corruption has been shown to retard economic development and reduce foreign investment.[53] At the municipal level it can increase inequality through the uneven distribution of resources and the reduction of public services.[54] Further, societies where corruption is endemic have a difficult time moving away from corrupt practices like bribery because it is a widely accepted norm.[55] Such norms trickle down to the local level, where small scale corruption has the potential to magnify inequality and reverse the potential contributions of the voluntourist, as well as boomerang back to national and global levels.

Following Kolstad and Wiig's examination of corruption in resource-rich developing countries, we argue that transparency (and its attendant ability to increase the costs of being corrupt, increase the likelihood of being caught, and increase the reward for non-corrupt behavior) is necessary to stem voluntourism corruption.[56] Thus we suggest a transparent agreement, in which any sum, good, or service to be given to the local partner could be negotiated and determined in advance. In doing so, the agreement would undermine corruption either carried out by or targeting the local partner. First, direct payments to the local partner would not be diluted by middlemen. Second, the designation of how the money would be spent would discourage bribery, particularly of local partners, because they could point to the agreement to demonstrate their obligations. Third, because we recommend that the amount to be paid and for what expenses would be made public, local partners would be less likely to direct the funds elsewhere as the members of the community would be armed with knowledge that could keep local partners accountable.

To be sure, making these elements of the contract publicly known could create attendant problems. For instance, jealousy amongst other members of the community could lead to theft from or marginalization of the local partner. Yet we assert that transparency with the community would be preferable to the alternative, where imagined gifts by what is as-

sumed to be 'filthy rich' people from the Global North might far outstrip reality.[57] Furthermore, efforts to combat corruption must start somewhere, and publicizing exchanges can mitigate corruption, especially at the municipal level.

It is also the case that in the absence of strong governance and compliance agencies, there is no guarantee that local partners won't renege on their commitments and engage in some type of fraud. Indeed, as Kolstad and Wiig have noted, while transparency is key, its presence is not a sufficient condition for decreasing corruption.[58] Also needed is the ability of other members of the community to *process* the publicly available information and have the *ability and incentives* capacity to act.[59] The former issue can be addressed by a simply written agreement that is posted on range of public media while the latter issue is structural and perhaps more difficult to solve in the short term. But as noted, the process of establishing the agreement and specifically addressing problems of corruption may be one way to establish a norm for the future.

Gatekeepers, representation, and distribution

Every community, no matter how poor, has its elite members – those who are in less relative need than others – and often it is these individuals or families who become the gatekeepers of a community, where they serve as the intermediary of their local communities and whatever foreigner seeks to engage the community. By dint of knowing a little more English, having the acquaintanceship of the local NGO representative or knowing the 'jargon of community mobilization', gatekeepers are able to take advantage of outside resources better than other members of the community.[60] Gatekeepers have been shown to highlight their own needs in matters of advocacy and humanitarian aid.[61] And of course gatekeeping can be a gendered problem as well: women often lack the ability to access resources as easily as men.[62] At the same time, it has been argued that women's empowerment programmes have the potential to marginalize men in the distribution of resources.[63]

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The effects of gatekeeping are not necessarily negative, as gatekeepers may relay the needs of all community members and distribute the benefits of whatever resources/attention they obtain efficiently. However, because gatekeepers are often considered the voice of the community and can suppress communication between the local community and the foreigner, the potential for misrepresentation and unequal distribution of resources is significant.

In voluntourism situations, where volunteers typically do not speak the local language and are ignorant of local customs, the risk of volunteers working with gatekeepers is high. Whether volunteers end up volunteering somewhere because they inquired about volunteer opportunities at a local tourist office or by hearing a recommendation from a fellow traveler, there is a good chance that volunteers will end up being connected with people in the community who have already been the beneficiary of previous volunteers. In this instance, cash injections might accumulate around members of the community with the knowledge, power or expertise to take advantage of voluntourism opportunities.

The best way to understand the multiplicity of needs in a community is through long-term and sustained contact with a community. But short term volunteers will have neither the time nor the knowledge to get beyond the voices of gatekeepers. While agreements cannot eliminate the possibility of working with gatekeepers, we recommend that the arrangement detail who in the community would be beneficiaries of the volunteer's resources and services. For example, the parties could agree that the voluntourist will spend time working with the vulnerable or marginalized. Alternatively, they could agree that the volunteer will share and pay for a meal with a particular disadvantaged group. Without the appropriate linguistic and cultural skills there is of course no way to ensure voluntourists go beyond the reach of gatekeepers, but an initial conversation between the voluntourist and the local partner explicitly discussing the intended beneficiaries may at the very least pave the way for a more equitable distribution of the volunteer's resources.

The danger of manipulated volunteer narratives

There is a longstanding and widespread critique about the way narratives and images produced both by international media and donors construct the underprivileged as helpless and without agency, often as a tool to enrich and bring attention to the agencies that offer assistance.[64] For example, after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, aid agencies working in Aceh, Indonesia, implemented inappropriate reconstruction plans, such as houses with insufficient space, use of the wrong materials, or the promotion of unsuitable septic tanks, partially due to the misperception of Acehnese as 'lacking in capacity… impoverished, isolated and hyper-traditional', living in a province that 'was seen as a poor and bounded place that should be grateful for what it received'.[65] Much in the same way, there is a danger that the stories volunteers tell when they return home, or the photographs that they post on social media during their experience, can render the local partner one-dimensional: poor or noble or delighted-that-I-helped-to-dig-some-vegetables-for-an-afternoon.

Just as a contract or agreement could spell out how the local partner is expected to spend her or his money, it could also detail how the volunteer will use the material that they collect during the experience. Should a sad story be shared with friends privately or posted on a public blog? Will a photograph of a stunning child be shared on Facebook? Will the challenges of the partner community be discussed in the volunteer's local newspaper or used at a job interview? Clearly, there are no right answers, but the discussion is one that rarely takes place between two actors of disparate power, and it should, particularly given the rapid and almost unlimited potential to share information and images via the internet. Furthermore, agreement as to how narratives are constructed would acknowledge the agency of the local partner and equip them with a degree of control over the reproduction of their own image.

Temporality

The structural challenges of international development exist in both time and space. Development workers complete contracts and move on to new countries or back to their home countries. A key deficiency with voluntourism is that, once volunteers have had their transformative experience, they return home and, often inevitably, close their minds to the hardships they encountered. At the same time, while the material position of local partners may have improved temporarily, they are left in essentially the same position as before. This issue is significantly compounded when volunteers make a commitment that extends beyond the voluntourism experience (such as sending money or encouraging other people to visit), but then ultimately return to their day-to-day life without following through with their promises.

This issue was recently demonstrated by a group of students from a university in Australia. Every two years, successive groups travelled to a school in a rural area in South Asia as part of a broader study tour, with each group making a commitment to raise money to be spent on the construction of a library. In each instance, on returning to Australia, a small group of determined students attempted to raise the money, but always fell short of the desired target. For six years, despite several thousands of dollars being raised, no money had been disbursed to the rural school and the library had yet to be built. This misadventure was disastrous for the local community, which, while expectantly waiting on the funds, was largely forgotten by the successive student groups who resumed their busy lives, enriched, no doubt, by their overseas experience, but oblivious to the social ramifications of their half-filled promise. Eventually the principal of the rural school was assaulted by a group of angry parents who accused him of misappropriating the funds. In this instance, the principal was not culpable. Rather, the well-meaning students who made a promise had failed to honour their bargain as the experience slipped further from memory.

While the funding to the community was eventually released some years later, the time it took for students to commit to their promises still caused some harm. An agreement or

contract could arrest these problems as obligations to respond in a timely manner would survive the voluntourism experience and travel home with the volunteer. In the above example, the students might have been held to their bargain had a time period been agreed to. Likewise, they might have acted more expeditiously if their well-intended promise had been appreciated as an obligation with real world consequences. In much the same way, a voluntourist could be held to continue their positive contributions on the conclusion of the experience by sending money or goods, writing a story in a local newspaper or drawing the attention of elected representatives to the development agenda. This temporal benefit could either be clearly expressed within the contract or agreement, or simply derive from the nature of the bargain itself; by acknowledging that an obligation continues in perpetuity and beyond a specific time and place, the volunteer is bound to honour the commitments s/he has made.

Conclusion

By arguing for contracts or agreements between local partners and individual tourists this article has likely raised as many questions as it has answered: In what language would the contract or agreement be negotiated or written? How does one make the contract public in communities where literacy is low? How do we ensure that this norm is adopted by the legion of voluntourists and local partners alike? To what extent, if any, should the agreement be binding and enforceable? How can the power of the internet, Facebook and mobile phones be best harnessed? And, to bring this line of questioning to a head, would our proposal actually work?

This conversation has been necessarily speculative. Nonetheless, it is imperative to think differently about the volunteer-local partner relationship. The current cost of voluntourism exceeds the benefits for many host communities, with the harmful consequences of the enterprise outliving the use-by date of a Facebook picture or relevance of a graduate *curricu-*

lum vitae, while simultaneously reproducing the very dynamics that help explain why the voluntourist, not the host, has a Facebook profile and a university degree in the first place.

To our minds, the solution lies within the nexus of the exchange itself. Agreements and soft contracts, irrespective of their form, are a potential way forward; the elements contained within them, such as offering money in exchange for time, acknowledging structural imbalances, guiding the actions of the voluntourist post-project and so on, have the potential to address these imbalances on a micro level. More broadly, a contract or agreement may help alter the way we think about larger development projects, reinforcing the importance of reciprocity and transparency for implementers and recipients of not only short-term assistance, but long-term aid. These ideas, we hold, are sufficiently compelling to enliven a necessary conversation.

Notes

1. We have broadened Wearing's commonly used definition that notes the 'organized' nature of voluntourism. Wearing, *Volunteer Tourism*, 1. Instead, our definition captures not only people who sign up in advance for short-term volunteer programmes, but also those well-meaning people who, during their travels, locate areas where they might be of help and offer time, services and goods to members of the local community. We note that this kind of unorganized assistance may require improvement even more than other kinds of voluntourism. We are also mindful of the relief/development rift to which many prescribe, which would have us differentiate between relief (service delivery) and development (attending to structural change) volunteer programmes in our analysis, for example, Banks et al., "NGOs, States, and Donors Revisited," 716. But accurate categorisation is both unlikely and unhelpful, as complex emergencies continue to blur the lines between the two types of programmes (see Duffield, "Complex Emergencies") and as short-term voluntourism programmes are increasingly considered vehicles by which voluntourists can operationalize a 'lifestyle politics of development'. Butcher and Smith, *Volunteer Tourism: Lifestyle Politics*, 7.
2. Tourism, Research and Marketing, *Volunteer Tourism.*
3. King, "What we are About."
4. Borland, "A Brief Social History."
5. Travel Weekly, "Volunteer Tourism."
6. Butcher and Smith, *Volunteer Tourism: Lifestyle Politics*.
7. Benson, "Why and How."
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