

# **Should I Stay or Should I Go?: Recommendations for Short-Term Missions and Volunteering Abroad**

## **Introduction**

The number of individuals participating in short-term service trips abroad has exploded in recent years. Estimates indicate that 800,000 to 1.1 million Americans volunteer overseas each year, with about 43% of trips lasting 2 weeks or less and approximately 42% lasting 2 weeks to 6 months. (Lough, “2012 Volunteer Abroad Report”) On top of that, another one to four million Americans take short-term Christian mission trips each year. (Priest 432, Ver Beek 478) However, despite the rising numbers of people participating in these trips each year, there is a great controversy surrounding short-term service abroad. A simple Internet search of “volunteer abroad” or “short-term mission trip” will yield, on one hand, hundreds of organizations promising to change lives and make a difference, and on the other, antagonistic articles with titles such as “Why You Should Consider Canceling Your Short-Term Mission Trip” and “Why Most Mission Trips Are a Waste of Time.” The difference between these two attitudes is striking, and one is naturally left to wonder what the effects of these trips really are. In this paper, I will first analyze the cases for and against short-term service trips abroad, utilizing both scholarly sources and the less academic websites more likely to be encountered by a potential volunteer. After examining both sides and drawing conclusions, I will make recommendations for a person looking to take a short-term service trip abroad for the benefit of both themselves and the people to be served.

Before beginning my analysis, I must define what types of trips will be discussed in this paper. Most generally, I will be studying short-term trips where volunteers travel to another

country to serve the poor in some way. Both religious trips (normally referred to as short-term missions or STM) and nonreligious ones (often called volunteer abroad or international volunteering) will be studied, so for simplicity's sake, I will use the term "service abroad" when referring to both types of trips together.

While service abroad can range in length from just a few days to years at a time, this paper will define "short-term" trips as those that last a year or less. The purpose of this is to focus both research and recommendations on service abroad that is more accessible to most people. While the average person is unable or unwilling to leave their job, family, or schooling to serve the poor for a period of years, many individuals can find ways to take short-term trips during vacation times and other breaks from their normal responsibilities. Short-term trips are also becoming especially popular among young adults who tend to have breaks from classes throughout the year, and it is increasingly common to hear of students taking an entire semester or year off school for a volunteer trip overseas.

Although there are numerous service trips that offer volunteer opportunities in one's own country, I choose to focus on trips abroad because of the ways that these trips uniquely impact both hosts and volunteers. These effects are less common in domestic service trips because they tend to relate to the change in location, specifically the cultural differences. However, I argue that many of the recommendations at the end of this paper can be applied to short-term domestic service trips as well.

Furthermore, organizations that send volunteers on service trips abroad have a wide range of missions and purposes from creating sustainable solutions to poverty, to teaching volunteers to leave their comfort zone, to building relationships between people of different cultures, and much more. However, the trips and organizations discussed in this paper all have volunteers

specifically doing some kind of work with poverty. This aims to shift the focus away from certain types of trips that may be of less interest to those invested in anti-poverty efforts, including but not limited to church mission trips solely focused on evangelism and trips classified as “volunteer tourism,” which primarily seek to provide an adventure vacation experience for the volunteer.

Although this paper focuses specifically on short-term trips, it is important to note that this type of service abroad fits into the much larger debate about the effects of foreign aid as a whole. Many scholars argue that aid from wealthy countries such as the United States does more harm than good. For example, William Easterly, in his book, *The White Man's Burden*, explains that after “sixty years of countless reform schemes to aid agencies and dozens of different plans, and \$2.3 trillion later, the aid industry is still trying to reach the beautiful goal [of “making poverty history”]” (11). This fact causes him to conclude that big plans to end poverty through foreign aid “will always fail” (11). However, at the other end of the spectrum, Jeffrey Sachs argues that “success in ending poverty traps will be much easier than it appears” (289) with the spread of “the benefits of science and technology...to all parts of the world” (351-352). Although this paper will not focus on this broader debate regarding foreign aid, it is an important backdrop to my discussion of short-term service by foreigners.

This paper will begin with an analysis of the case against short-term service trips abroad because, in my experience, those considering taking a trip will mostly be applauded by others and encouraged to follow through with their plans to serve abroad. With this in mind, I will first look at why such a trip might not be as good as it sounds and then proceed to assess whether there is any reason to still consider a short-term service trip abroad. Part 1 will break down the case against these trips by dividing it into four distinct claims: a) Short-term term service trips

abroad do not benefit host communities; b) Short-term service trips abroad harm host communities; c) Short-term service trips abroad do not benefit volunteers; and d) Short term service trips abroad harm volunteers. Part 2 will look at evidence supporting the case for short-term missions abroad which suggests that a) Short-term service trips abroad benefit host communities, and that b) Short-term service trips abroad benefit volunteers. Part 3 will be short but will draw conclusions about short-term service abroad by analyzing the information from the first two sections. The final section of the paper, Part 4, will make recommendations for a person interested in taking a short-term service trip abroad, looking specifically at a) Trips designed not to harm host communities; b) Trips designed to benefit host communities; c) Trips designed not to harm volunteers; and d) Trips designed to benefit volunteers. This section will help potential volunteers identify what to look for when navigating trip options, hopefully providing them with the necessary information to select a trip that will be beneficial to both themselves and the people being served.

### **Part 1: A Case Against Short-Term Service Trips Abroad**

Before looking into the academic resources addressing the four main arguments against short-term service abroad, I would like to give a brief introduction using the “antagonistic articles” described in the introduction, which are likely to be the only “anti-short-term service abroad” material that a potential volunteer will encounter as they research trip options.

The Gospel Coalition’s 2012 article, “Why You Should Consider Canceling Your Short-Term Mission Trips,” which appears in the top five websites brought up by a Google search for “short-term mission trip,” begins with a horrific list of experiences where volunteer teams painted the same houses numerous times, erected buildings that were never used by anyone except the volunteers themselves, and helped babies for a week but did nothing for them after

leaving the country. It then cites Robert Lupton's powerful quote which says, "Contrary to popular belief, most missions trips and service projects *do not*: empower those being served, engender healthy cross-cultural relationships, improve quality of live, relieve poverty, change the lives of participants [or] increase support for long-term missions work." The author proceeds to explain how missionaries and volunteers have robbed work from local people, created beggars through unhealthy dependence, and ultimately left the countries in a worse state than ever. (Carlson)

Similarly, even the Center for Student Missions, argues against the majority of STM trips in "Why Most Mission Trips Are a Waste of Time." In this article, Becchetti argues that many Christian mission trips fail by doing projects that local ministries and organizations do not actually need, tying up local staff whose time could be better used on a different task. She also explains that Western organizations tend to do ministry expecting very specific results, which again, do not always align with what the local ministry/organization and host community actually want or need. (Becchetti)

Nonreligious articles such as "Pitfalls in Volunteering Abroad," say many of the same things. This article warns that, in the worst cases, volunteer trips abroad "can violate concepts of social justice and human rights." It specifically notes that, in the medical field, these trips, "undermine the local healthcare system, cause significant harm, and reinforce poverty." By listing problems like volunteer doctors practicing beyond their abilities, this article advises potential volunteers to consider carefully before taking a short-term service trip abroad. ("Pitfalls in Volunteering Abroad")

However, although these types of articles may be read by potential volunteers, they are less significant in our assessment of short-term service trips abroad due to their tendency to be

highly biased, lacking in reliable sources, and often based entirely on personal experiences. Instead, I will highlight various case studies and scholarly articles that challenge supporters of short-term service trips abroad.

### **Part 1a: Short-Term Service Trips Abroad Do Not Benefit Host Communities**

Organizations that send volunteers on short-term trips abroad often advertise with slogans like, “Become known as someone who makes a real difference in the lives of others!” (“Volunteer Abroad”); however, some (Ver Beek) would argue that these trips are not actually making a significant difference in the lives of those being served. Evidence demonstrates short-term service trips abroad failing to benefit host communities in four main areas including: failure to meet the people’s needs, failure to build cross-cultural relationships, failure to increase long-term support, and, in the case of STM trips, failure to make a significant spiritual impact.

One of the most common arguments against short-term service trips abroad claims that, although volunteers may address what they perceive to be the major needs in a host community, they ignore or fail to adequately meet the community’s actual needs. In an article about balancing the goals of the volunteer with those of the host community, Brian Ouma and Helen Dimaras suggest that “continuing on a path aimed at meeting preconceived goals rather than one aimed at creating mutually beneficial goals, will likely end in failure”(3). There are also cases in which short-term teams meet immediate needs but in a manner that is unsustainable and thus not beneficial once volunteers leave. In Green’s case study about short-term medical projects in Guatemala, local doctors noted that foreign surgical teams were addressing immediate problems but not the roots and factors that had caused those problems, predominately the widespread poverty in the community. Beyond that, they complained that North American teams were

primarily providing physicians, which were not particularly scarce in their community and that the volunteers gave out medications without keeping any record of what was being given to which patient and why. This meant that, when the team left, local doctors had no way to continue treating the patients, and their needs were only temporarily met. In the same study, native Guatemalans also commented on the handouts given away by the teams and how they were not always useful for the people receiving them. For example, one team gave free eyeglasses to everyone they encountered, without any consideration of who actually needed them and what prescription would best meet their needs; another doctor discussed receiving donations of expired medications that they obviously could not give out (Green 5, 9-10). Similarly, Lauren Montgomery, who wrote an article based on two case studies of annual mission trips run by Christian colleges, points out that the short-term medical teams in Mexico provided treatments and surgeries but did not address long-term issues or take any steps to educate patients in preventive measures that could improve their health (Montgomery 336-338). These issues pointed out by Green and Montgomery help us to see the importance of carefully analyzing the “help” offered by these service trips. Their work indicates that, if the stated goal of a trip is to meet the needs of people living in poverty, some volunteers appear to be wasting their time and money.

There is also doubt regarding the relationships supposedly built through short-term service trips abroad. Bringing foreigners to a host country has the potential to create cross-cultural friendships that promote the sharing of knowledge, experience, and ideas. However, many trips reflect volunteers, especially those traveling in groups, tending to spend a great deal of their time surrounded with other foreign volunteers and isolated from the local people (“Cross Cultural Solutions,” “Global Leadership Adventures”). In Ver Beek’s study, where foreign

teams built houses in Honduras, the interviewed natives explained feeling that the volunteers had missed opportunities to build deep relationships with them, specifically by eating all meals with their group and not as part of the community. They also felt that, although the team members professed openness and a desire to get to know their hosts, the volunteers' actual attitudes seemed closed-off and distant. They felt this so strongly that the majority of Honduran individuals and agencies confessed that, if given the choice between having the STM team come to build houses and having the STM team send extra money to build more houses, they would choose the latter. Similarly disturbing is that fact that, despite describing the weaknesses of these relationships, the Hondurans interviewed actually considered these relationships to be the most valuable part of the North American visits. This study, although it reflects a single organization sending teams to just one location, leaves us wondering how many others living in poverty and supposedly benefiting from short-term service trips would actually prefer financial donations over service by foreign volunteers. (Ver Beek 481-484) Research conducted by Comhla'mh on host organizations in India and Tanzania also indicates that the language barrier can be a major obstacle in developing relationships with volunteers. One respondent from an organization in Tanzania even said that, "...some of the volunteers don't even try to learn the language, they are just satisfied with having a translator every time" (8). Such a statement on the lack of volunteers' efforts to connect with the locals clearly causes one to doubt whether these volunteers are even trying to form cross-cultural relationships with their hosts.

Although I have heard individuals who organize short-term trips confess doubts as to whether these trips actually benefit the people being served, these individuals still support the trips, believing that volunteers on the short-term trips will become long-term supporters of the host community, or at least of other impoverished host communities. Some will even suggest



that these trips pay themselves off because participants become such generous supporters of the service organizations and host communities. However, although research supports the idea that participants in short-term service trips abroad give more money in support of charity and poverty relief after participating in a trip (Whitner 56), Priest points out that such studies do not consider the fact that many of the volunteers who take these trips are young people with no income. Therefore, giving more money to missions in the years after their trip may be a natural result of their increased age and income, not an effect of taking the trip. Similarly, although there has been a boom in the number of short-term missionaries and volunteers in recent years, there has not been a rise in career missionaries of equal scale. (Priest 435-436) This indicates either that short-term trips are not creating the professed interest in long-term service abroad or that there is not enough financial support to fund an equal rise in long-term missionaries (which Priest suggests may actually be a result of support for short-term trips taking away from financial support for career missionaries). Still, I believe it would be unfair to completely disregard the ability of short-term service trips abroad to inspire volunteers to pursue long term missionary work or service abroad. I personally have a friend living and serving the poor in a rural Honduran community who was largely motivated by her short-term trip to Mexico after high school (Marillyn Beard, see “Rancho Oasis for Youth”) and have heard similar testimonies by other career missionaries.

Lastly, short-term trips that are faith-based usually send volunteers abroad with a goal of effecting the host community spiritually, even when the trips have a strong focus on serving the poor. This spiritual effect is pursued by means of preaching the gospel, encouraging fellow believers, praying with people, etc. However, Ver Beek’s study in Honduras showed that, although some locals did feel closer to God after receiving a new house built by a short term

team, there was no notable difference in spiritual impact between those whose homes were built for \$30,000 by foreign groups and those whose homes were built for \$2,000 by local organizations (Ver Beek 480). Concerns regarding conversions resulting from mission trips have also been expressed by others such as John Nevius, who worried about the creation of “rice Christians,” or individuals that profess a conversion to Christianity in order to receive benefits such as food and shelter (Rowell 34). I would also add to Nevius’ concern the possibility of people in host communities getting excited about the opportunity to commit their lives to Christ, not due to a clear understanding of the gospel, but because of the positive feedback given by past short-term teams when locals raised their hand to demonstrate “conversion.” However, although these are legitimate concerns, we must realize the difficulty in measuring spiritual impacts and recognize that, for many Christians, one person’s genuine commitment to Christ is still worth the trip, even if many other conversions are false, confused, or insincere (Luke 15:10).

While it would be unfair to assume from these examples that short-term service trips abroad never benefit host communities, this argument definitely points out the importance of using caution when reading reports from service abroad agencies. Clearly one cannot assume that a trip will be life-changing for the people of the host community just because volunteers go there to serve them. This brief look at just one aspect of the case against short-term service trips abroad also points out a need for further research. There is little evidence of organizations measuring, evaluating, or assessing the impacts of their trips on the host communities, and further research in this area would not only help potential volunteers to analyze different programs, but would also help staff determine ways to improve their short-term service trips to increase the benefits to hosts.

### **Part 1b: Short-Term Service Trips Abroad Harm Host Communities**

Even more alarming than the idea that short-term service trips abroad may not help host communities is the claim that these trips actually harm the people being served. Based on a range of evidence, short-term service trips abroad can cause harm to host communities by decreasing local job opportunities, promoting dependency, putting strain on local organizations working alongside foreign teams, and creating social and cultural tension.

Regarding job opportunities, both Ver Beek and Green include comments by locals that express frustration resulting from the effects of foreign volunteers on the job market. Ver Beek's project points out that Hondurans in the community, who were often desperately in need of work, could have been paid to do much of the construction work and painting (483), and Green's study in Guatemala includes an interview with one local doctor who complained that the large number of NGO clinics in his area was actually decreasing the government incentive to provide funding for him to set up a 24-7 health clinic run by local doctors (6). Sherraden *et al.* adds that this displacement of local workers can also contribute to inequality (407), and Montgomery sums up this argument by stating that "local[s]...who must earn a living in the community cannot compete with the volunteers who donate their services. Furthermore, they cannot provide the same volume of free care over sustained periods and remain financially viable" (337). This issue is clearly not a rare incident among service abroad organizations, and therefore, we must be wary of this when assessing the effects of a short-term trip.

Discussed even more frequently than the potential loss of local jobs to foreign volunteers, the creation of dependency may very well be the number one argument against short-term service trips abroad. This comes up frequently in discussions of medical service trips. For example, one Guatemalan in Green's study commented that people were becoming so reliant on free aid that they would choose to wait around for free handouts from short-term teams instead of

seeking help for themselves to meet their medical needs (Green 6). This method of free handouts is highly criticized for making people feel helpless and incapable of addressing their own needs, contributing to the cycle of poverty. Comhla'mh's work, which is not specific to medical trips also addresses this issue, saying:

Some volunteers do things that create a sense of dependence in the communities – small donations in monies, clothes and any other gifts may be a hindrance to self-reliant attitudes”. According to one participant, “it is not proper to give monies to members of the host communities, especially while in placement. It is feared that it may create an attitude of dependence, while volunteerism is expected to promote self-reliance. Many receiving organisations prohibit volunteers from dishing out monies to individuals”. In general, it was felt that placing restrictions on volunteers' donations was a positive approach. (Comhla'mh 12-13).

Although such handouts may seem beneficial and give volunteers that warm fuzzy feeling of helping a person in need, we must carefully consider the long-term effects of these acts of kindness, weighing the short-term help along with the creation of lifelong attitudes.

In addition, while short-term service trips abroad are often run by agencies outside of the host country, such organizations usually partner with NGOs and other programs within the host community, and these local agencies tend to have the most interaction with both volunteers and hosts. Although this connection to local people is important, there is also evidence that foreign volunteers can be a major burden to the local organizations. The study by Green, in addition to interviewing local doctors in Guatemala, also includes feedback from staff in the host community whose organization partnered with the short-term teams. These staff expressed gratefulness for the teams and their sacrifice but also mentioned the burdens that came along with the teams. They specifically noted the financial burdens resulting from housing and feeding the volunteers and the loss of efficiency when volunteers needed a lot of instruction and help to do their work. The staff added that the greatest burdens came from translating for volunteers who did not speak the local language and showing volunteers around the community. One

particular staff member even articulated feeling like “half project coordinator and half tour guide” (Green 8). I have seen evidence of these burdens firsthand in the eyes of exhausted staff working with short-term teams in both Honduras and Peru, and Sherraden also comments on these factors, additionally noting the potential drain of an organization’s resources (water, electricity, etc.) that can occur when housing foreigners who are used to a different way of life (407-408).

Foreign volunteers’ lack of knowledge of the local culture can also result in animosity and social tension (Sherraden 408). In Guatemala, the native doctors complained that white volunteer doctors often had a superior attitude, causing patients to believe that their local doctors were not competent. This put strain on the relationships between Guatemalan doctors and their patients, but also led to very frustrated Guatemalan doctors with a very negative view of foreign volunteers and even white people in general. (Green 8) Comhla’mh’s research also cites such frustration, quoting a host organization representative in Tanzania who said, “some of these volunteers would come and be with us, but just [as] we start to get used to working with them they are already very tired and bored and need a break...So they tell us they will work for two weeks, but after three days they want to go on safari” (8). These kinds of tension are dangerous because they can easily transform into bigger and more threatening issues such as mistrust, racism, and violence.

Most of these harms caused by short-term service abroad occur when sending organizations are poorly run and/or volunteers are poorly trained. However, there are also cases when volunteers and the organizations that they work with are simply misguided in their understanding of how to truly help the host community they are serving. For this reason, if one decides to take a short-term service trip abroad, it is extremely important to look for signs of

these major problems when looking at trip options. More specific recommendations about how to select trips that do not harm host communities are offered in section 4a.

### **Part 1c: Short-Term Service Trips Abroad Do Not Benefit Volunteers**

Although a major argument in support of short-term service abroad comes from the supposed transformation in the lives of volunteers, many of those against short-term service abroad argue that the effects perceived by the volunteers do not correspond with real life change (Ver Beek, Priest).

In the previously mentioned study by Ver Beek, foreign volunteers travelled to Honduras to build houses and came back reporting that the trip had changed their lives. In their post-trip survey, 59% of volunteers claimed that after the trip, they gave somewhat or significantly more money to CIDO, the organization that ran the trip and worked in the host country. 84% said that they had greater interest in poor countries because of the trip, 75% expressed increased interest in future STM trips, and 42% reported a greater desire to participate in long-term mission work. However, although more than half of the volunteers claimed that their lives were impacted in each of these different areas, further research of volunteer giving, the one question on the survey that could be verified objectively, indicated that self-reporting by the volunteers may have shown extremely exaggerated life changes. While 10% of volunteers claimed that their giving to CIDO had *significantly* increased and 49% claimed that their giving was somewhat increased, actual donations showed virtually no change. Within 2 years of the trip, only 25% of the volunteers had given any kind of donation to the organization, and total giving only went up 6% from what it was before the trip. (Ver Beek 477, 485) Even though this research only focuses on one element from the survey, it suggests that the other perceived changes may also fail to reflect real changes in the lifestyles and behaviors of the volunteers. Priest notes similar findings when he

describes the results of a study looking at annual giving to missions-related causes. Like Ver Beek, he found “no statistically significant difference in giving to missions between those who had participated in STM and those who had not” (439). In addition to looking at giving patterns, Priest also used a Likert scale to assess whether or not people had become less materialistic as a result of their short-term mission trip. The survey included phrases like, “I like a lot of luxury in my life,” and “I would be happier if I could buy more things,” and individuals marked 1-7 based on how true the statement was for them personally. Surprisingly, although people noted being greatly affected by encountering poverty and becoming more grateful, results showed no link between taking a trip and scores on the materialism survey. (Priest 439-440) These studies are discussed, not to prove that short-term service trips are worthless to volunteers, but merely to suggest that they may not be as beneficial as some may profess or believe. This research especially points out the importance of testing the perceived benefits wherever possible to see if they correspond with real changes in the volunteers’ life after the trip.

### **Part 1d: Short-Term Service Trips Abroad Harm Volunteers**

In looking at how volunteers are affected by their short-term service trips abroad, it is also important to consider whether these trips can actually cause harm to the volunteers. Kate Simpson describes some of these dangers in her essay about gap years by British students. She comments that, “the gap year industry offers a view that encourages a perception of development as a simple matter” (685). She proceeds to explain various concerns about how volunteers walk away from short-term service trips abroad with distorted ideas about poverty and development. She discusses how young people often return with the perspective that poverty is something foreign, existing only in some “other” world separate from the his or her own reality. She comments that these trips focus on differences instead of similarities and can cause volunteers to

see themselves as very separate and disconnected from the people they are serving. She also notes that volunteers commonly return with ideas about poverty that make light of people's desperate conditions, such as the cliché amazement over how the people were so “poor but happy.” Shortly after reading this article, I was surprised to hear almost these exact words come from a friend who had just returned from a ten day trip to the Philippines. After such a short trip, it made me more than a little uncomfortable to hear her say that, “the people there have nothing, but I’m pretty sure that they are *never* unhappy.” This is definitely unsettling; however, Simpson’s biggest concern is that participants in these short-term trips go home believing in “a world in which ‘luck’ explains inequality, in which change will come through the interventions of outsiders, and where there are few shared experiences between people” (690). Pluim and Jorgenson agree with this, explaining how volunteers often fail to understand the socio-political context of poverty and see it as a random occurrence (33). Simpson, Pluim, and Jorgenson all worry that these trips are negatively impacting the way that volunteers see the world, and based on the testimonies of short-term service trips abroad that I have heard and even given myself, this is a very legitimate concern.

## **Part 2: A Case For Short-Term Service Trips Abroad**

As with the case against short-term service abroad, we must first examine the information being offered to potential volunteers regarding the benefits of these trips. A person considering a short-term service trip abroad will most likely begin by exploring the websites of the sending organizations that come up first on Google. When looking at just the first few websites under “volunteer abroad,” and “international volunteering,” one will generally find trip organizations making bold statements such as, “We provide the world’s most affordable, need-driven, and supportive short-term volunteer programs” (“Plan My Gap Year”) and “Change their world.



Change yours. This changes everything” (“Cross Cultural Solutions”). Perhaps of more interest to the volunteers, though, are the volunteer reviews and testimonials that can be found on most websites offering trip opportunities. These reviews frequently appear in the form of blogs where past volunteers rave about falling in love with poor communities, having opened eyes, and being forever changed. (“Volunteers in Action”) Such reviews certainly appeal to any potential volunteer, but for those looking for more than a good feeling and a fun trip, it is worthwhile to look at specific evidence of how these trips can benefit both host communities and volunteers.

### **Part 2a: Short-Term Service Trips Abroad Help Host Communities**

Contrary to those claiming that short-term service abroad is not beneficial, or worse yet, is harmful to host communities, there are also academics whose studies demonstrate ways in which short-term service trips abroad have positively affected host communities. Some of the most notable benefits associated with these trips are the skills passed on from volunteers to locals, the donations brought by the volunteers, and the money paid into the community by the volunteers.

Although Ver Beek provides much critique of the short-term work in Honduras, he does note that, when the agency running the trip was well managed, it resulted in more appreciative homeowners who paid off the loans given by the organization and were more likely to participate in the community. He also points out the importance of a training program for the locals. When foreign volunteers taught the natives the skills they were using to do their work, the local people were able to benefit from these skills even after the volunteers left. (Ver Beek 482) Similarly, Hayden *et al.* describes the importance of such training when discussing mission trips by a team from the University of California at San Diego, saying that, “at the end of 3 years, with one intensive trip per year, the host neurosurgeons were proficiently and independently ...providing

newly learned operations such as neuroendoscopy and minimally invasive neurosurgery” (145). Such training allows locals to continue the projects and services provided by volunteers even when the volunteers are no longer around to lead, which is also important in that it decreases dependency.

In the same way, Green, who mostly reports Guatemalan doctors’ complaints about short-term medical teams, also mentions that the doctors considered the donations of equipment and supplies given by the short-term teams to be one of the greatest benefits. Excluding the donations of expired medicine, these gifts were useful to the community long after the team left the country. (Green 10) I also saw this to be true when I worked for Rancho Oasis for Youth (RO4Y) in Honduras. Short-term teams often partnered with the ministry to do construction projects, and although their time in the community was usually just 5-10 days, these teams often left expensive power tools that RO4Y and their Honduran staff would then be able to use for years.

Looking at economic impacts, interviews with locals in the village of Carona, Costa Rica, where short-term foreign volunteers built a community center, reflected that the hosts had a very positive view of the team’s visit. 20% of the community was interviewed in this study and almost every respondent listed at least three economic benefits from the short-term team. These individuals most commonly commented upon the money spent by the volunteers on souvenirs and crafts made by the local people, the purchases of materials for the building project, the payment given to those who housed and fed the volunteers in their homes, and the opportunities to earn wages by serving as tour guides. Calculations reflected that, in this 10 week trip, foreigners paid \$8,000 into the community, which, in the eyes of the hosts, was considered a “significant” and “important” impact. (42 Michell) This may not have been a notable economic

effect in the eyes of the volunteers; however, the hosts were extremely appreciative, demonstrating how, oftentimes, a small sacrifice by a foreign volunteer can make a huge difference to an individual in a host community.

While the benefits of short-term service trips may not be as dramatic as some organizations may claim, it is clear that these trips can be beneficial. They can impact communities in positive ways, even after volunteers have left the country. However, the difficulty comes in considering whether these potential benefits are worth the risks of doing harm to host communities, and, as mentioned previously, more research is needed in this area. I agree wholeheartedly with Pluim and Joregenson that, “although we can speculate the effects and ‘benefits’ or lack thereof in the host communities, a considerable gap in the literature and research exists” (32).

### **Part 2b: Short-Term Service Trips Abroad Helps Volunteers**

Although the research about how short-term service trips benefit host communities is lacking, many studies show these trips positively impacting volunteers. These studies, which will be discussed below, reflect increased civic engagement, positive changes in perspective and awareness, and increased faith/religious practice after participation in a short-term service trip abroad. Others also point out the potential benefits to the volunteers in their employability, personal growth, and character.

In 2011, Beyerlein *et al.* did a study looking at differences in political participation, volunteering, and giving to charity between adolescent students who had gone on a short-term mission trip and those who had not. Recognizing that many factors besides the trip could contribute to increased civic engagement, these researchers controlled for affiliation, attendance, private religiosity, age, parent civic involvement, and many other factors. Their study of over

3,200 participants showed that “taking a religious mission trip has a positive significant effect” on volunteering, giving to charity, and political participation (Beyerlein, Trinitapoli, & Adler 789). They noted that the largest effect was seen in volunteering, with those who had gone on a mission trip being over twice as likely to volunteer as those who had not (791-792). This is a significant finding and indicates that, even if, as Priest and Ver Beek suggest, some perceived benefits to volunteers are exaggerated, it is possible for trips to cause actual, measurable changes in lifestyle.

In 2008, Swartzentuber’s study of young people looked at high school students who went on short-term mission trips with their Christian high school. Interviews with these participants commonly reflected a perception of changed intercultural sensitivity, which was a combination of new perspectives on relationships, poverty, and serving others (75). Students expressed new awareness of the struggles that others face and a renewed sense of gratefulness for their own lives. Perhaps even more important than the changes they noted in their own perspectives are the comments describing how the trip had impacted their peers. Participants saw in their classmates an increased interest in serving others and also noted how the trip had strengthened the relationships between classmates. (Swartzentuber) Pluim and Jorgenson also describe how Canadian Youth Volunteer Abroad programs alter volunteers’ way of thinking, helping them to better understand the world and international issues (27). This eye-opening experience is also commonly described in volunteers’ post-trip reviews and blogs; however, when considering these changes in world view and perspective, we must also consider how these can be skewed and harmful to volunteers, as indicated in Part 1d. For this reason, it is important for potential volunteers to seek volunteer experiences that will not cause glorified or unrealistic “poverty awareness.” Recommendations for this will be discussion in section 4c.

Still looking at Christian STM trips, Trinatpoli and Vaisey's research in 2009 involved interviews with over 2,500 random adolescents. This project showed STM trips having a significant impact on the volunteers' spirituality, indicating that "individuals who went on a mission trip are significantly less likely to report that they are unsure about their belief in God. Going on a mission trip also decreases the likelihood of viewing God as an impersonal force and increases feelings of closeness to God" (138). Students who had gone on STM trips were also more likely to report increased levels of religious practice (prayer, Bible reading, and church attendance) compared to those who had not been on a trip (138). Unlike in Ver Beek's study, where volunteers' excitement about their trip may have resulted in perceived impacts inconsistent with the actual impacts, adolescents in this research project did not report on their religious beliefs or practice in light of their mission trip. Because these students were questioned in the context of their mission trip, we have no reason to believe that the students who reported participation in a mission trip were any more likely to exaggerate their religiosity than those who did not.

Moving away from religious examples, Sherraden, Lough, and McBride discuss many of the ways in which a volunteers' character can be impacted by participating in a short-term trip abroad. Among these are acquisition of problem solving and leadership skills as well as increased ability to work effectively with a team. They also point out how service abroad can help young people explore career options and may even increase employability in certain fields, since many employers may appreciate the confidence, experience, and embracing of diversity that comes from such trips. (409) Plum and Jorgenson add that there are many important skills and traits that are extremely difficult to teach in a classroom. For example, they comment that global citizenship can much better taught through experiential learning. (27) Regarding

volunteering abroad, they specifically note that such trips teach students to deal with new situations and build confidence by letting them experience things they would not be allowed to do in Canada, such as building a house (27-28). Though not every volunteer may learn these lessons and develop these traits, service abroad provides opportunities for growth that a participant may not encounter elsewhere.

While the effects of trips on volunteers are often difficult to measure, these studies demonstrate that there is at least some truth in the claims that volunteers are changed for the better through short-term service trips abroad. The biggest question that arises regards how much of the perceived benefit truly affects volunteers. While some research in this area has been discussed, analysis of both sides of this argument calls for further study.

### **Part 3: Conclusions from Case For and Against**

After looking closely at both the case against short-term service trips abroad and the case for them, it is clear that the case against has more support. However, I do not suggest that, based on this information, we regard all short-term service trips abroad as destructive and discourage everyone we know from short-term missions and volunteering. Instead, I argue that the case *for* short-term service trips abroad reveals great potential in these trips, a capacity to benefit both hosts and volunteers. Yes, they have caused harm in many cases, but there have also been cases where they have helped. So instead of squashing the good intentions of the million plus people that go on these trips every year (many of whom would not be convinced to cancel their plans anyway), why not focus our efforts on promoting the “good” trips, ones that minimize the harm and maximize the benefits to hosts and volunteers, in hopes that they will become models for less effective trips to revise their programs? Such promotion will primarily involve making

potential volunteers aware of the possible harms and educating them in what to look for and avoid in their short-term mission trips abroad. Such recommendations can be found below.

#### **Part 4: Recommendations for Short-Term Service Abroad**

This section is specifically written for those who are looking to take a short-term service trip abroad or recommend a trip to someone else. As mentioned previously, these suggestions are for individuals seeking to address poverty through their trip, although this need not be the exclusive goal. While this section is broken into four parts, I argue that the most beneficial trip will combine elements from each of these sections in order to not only avoid harm, but also benefit both host communities and volunteers. Also, I must note that, while I do highlight aspects of various programs, this does not reflect personal support of any of these organizations as a whole.

##### **Part 4a: Trips Designed Not To Harm Host Communities**

As mentioned in Part 1b, short-term service trips abroad can harm host communities by decreasing job opportunities for locals, creating dependency, putting extra burdens on local organizations, and causing cultural and social tension. In an effort to avoid such harms, potential volunteers must look for trips that actively seek to avoid each of these issues.

When assessing how a service trip affects local job opportunities, there are three basic questions to ask. First, does the organization in the host community hire foreign or local staff to run their programs? Although it is not the only indicator of the trip's effects on the job market, hiring local staff at least demonstrates that an organization is providing some jobs for local people. One can usually find this information relatively easily on the trip organization's website under a tab such as "Staff" or "Our People." Second, one can inquire as to whether the local

organization hires natives in the community to do any of the work associated with their project, such as construction or transportation. Many organizations have volunteers and foreign staff do this kind of work (painting, replacing roofing, driving volunteers around, etc.), which can almost always be done by locals. Conversely, volunteers should seek organizations that work to create jobs for local people. For example, International Student Volunteers builds sustainable agricultural solutions and then hires native people to do the farming and gardening. They also encourage local businesses and restaurants to buy the food from these new local farmers. (“ISV”)

The third question is the most important but can also be the most difficult to determine. One must ask if, as a foreign volunteer, you and the organization you work with will be providing something that is not offered by the locals. For example, Green’s study demonstrated that bringing doctors to a community only made circumstances more difficult for local physicians who were equally capable of doing the same work. Potential volunteers should seek out service trips that bring something to the host community that is not already there. This is demonstrated in World Medical Mission, a branch of Samaritan’s Purse, which provides short-term volunteer abroad opportunities for doctors. This organization is unique in that it first hires local doctors at each mission hospital and then offers short-term volunteer positions for the roles that cannot be met by people within the community, most of which are much more specialized and often require education and training not offered in the host country. (“World Medical Missions”) Finding out whether a service trip is robbing locals of jobs can be difficult but is worth the extra effort. Any person wanting to alleviate poverty should certainly do all that he or she can to avoid promoting unemployment.

Having local staff is also an important factor in assessing whether an organization running short-term trips is creating dependency in a community. An agency run entirely by



foreigners with minimal leadership by local people should be a red flag to potential volunteers. Instead, one ought to look for organizations that train local people to lead and run the organizations' programs. This restores agency to the local people instead of instilling a sense of helplessness. Free handouts should also be avoided, as they teach people to wait for help instead of to actively address their own problems and needs. Volunteers can still make donations without causing such dependency, as exemplified by Rancho Oasis for Youth, which receives clothing donations from short-term teams and then hold large sales where people in the community can buy items for a small amount that even the poorest can afford. They note that, by charging just a little, people feel ownership of what they buy and only take what they need. Attaching a cost, albeit small, to the donations helps to steer the host community away from patterns of dependency. ("Rancho Oasis for Youth") Nuru International, although it only has a few short-term positions, also has a fantastic model for restoring agency and avoiding dependency in antipoverty work. Nuru immediately partners with local leaders when beginning a project and equips and trains these leaders as they work together to identify problems and design solutions in the community. Nuru also recruits local business people to fund each of their projects and aims to completely leave each community after several years, with all programs entirely in the hands of the local people. ("Nuru International") This type of support and faith in the host community is very important when looking for organizations and trips that will truly alleviate poverty and not just its symptoms.

While volunteers have a personal responsibility to minimize burdens to local nonprofits, churches, and organizations in host communities, potential volunteers can also identify trips that avoid these burdens. First, I recommend trips that involve as much training in skills, language, and culture as possible. At a minimum, volunteers should be trained for several days before their

trip, such as those who work with Volunteer Base Camp and complete a 7-day training that includes instruction in culture, transportation, safety, and a 20-hour intensive language class (“Volunteer Base Camp”). In addition, I suggest trips in countries where one speaks the native language. A potential volunteer majoring in Spanish would likely be much less of a burden to staff of an Ecuadorian nonprofit than to staff of an Ethiopian one. Skills should also be considered. Instead of trips that advertise “no skills necessary,” why not look for opportunities where one has some useful skills or at least possesses some relevant background knowledge? Many host organizations actually lament that they do not receive more skilled volunteers. For example, Comhlamh’s work highlights “the need for more skilled volunteers, particularly in the areas of HR development & training, IT, engineering, and organizations development experts, in order to ‘improve the standards of work that is carried out’” (10). Lastly, I recommend that volunteers who truly want to avoid burdening host organizations look for trips that do not include tourism. A volunteer can free up the local staff and support local tour guides and businesses by seeing the sites on their own time and utilizing resources outside of the organization.

The last point regarding avoiding harm goes hand in hand with the previous three. Social and cultural tensions tend to arise when foreign volunteers take local jobs, have a superior attitude (which can often go along with the creation of dependency), and burden local organizations. Therefore, I argue that if a volunteer partners with an organization seeking to minimize harm in these other areas, outside of being rude or inconsiderate to individuals in the host community, creating tension should not be an issue.

Looking for trips that do not cause harm to host communities is vital to those seeking to alleviate poverty, and in addition to carefully selecting what trip to go on, volunteers must work

individually to avoid these harms while they are abroad. This involves treating locals with respect, resisting the urge to give free handouts, being conscientious of their use of resources, and not expecting organizations in the host community to cater to their every desire.

#### **Part 4b: Trips Designed To Help Host Communities**

Not harming host communities is essential; however, most potential volunteers also express desires to actually make a positive difference in host communities. In order to do this, we must consider the factors addressed in Part 1a. How can a short-term trips abroad meet the needs in the host community, build cross-cultural relationships between volunteers and locals, and build long-term support for the host community?

Regarding needs, Ouma and Diamaras suggest that one essential component of short-term service abroad is an unstructured approach, believing that, when trip programs are too structured, they tend to focus on students' own goals instead of the goals that will benefit the host. Their article suggests that descriptions given to volunteers before the trip should be somewhat vague so that students don't get locked into artificial goals (3). While, practically speaking, I do not expect many potential volunteers to get excited about vague trip descriptions, I would argue that websites and trip information should demonstrate to volunteers the need for flexibility and the importance of listening to locals and asking questions before trying to "help." I would also recommend looking for trips where the work done by volunteers is determined by native staff/organizations and not foreign agencies/staff who are planning the trip. Cross Cultural Solutions seeks to do this by surveying host organizations regularly regarding their goals and by holding annual workshops where organizations can provide direct feedback ("Cross Cultural Solutions"). Meeting needs in a sustainable way is also important, and volunteers can promote this by selecting trips that involve training programs for locals. For example, WaterStep trains

Philippines in water safety and also teaches them how to use and maintain the water purifiers that their programs install (“WaterStep”). Trips with this kind of community involvement and training are crucial to meeting people’s actual needs in both the short-term and the long-term.

In addition, there are simple ways by which a potential volunteer can identify short-term trips that will promote the building of cross-cultural relationships. For the greatest opportunities to build relationships, I recommend trips that place just one or two foreign volunteers with a local organization, as opposed to placing an entire group of foreigners together. A volunteer is clearly going to connect with more local people if there are fewer opportunities to interact with people that speak the same language and have similar backgrounds and experiences. Organizations such as Volunteer Action for Peace intentionally have their volunteers work with just one or two other foreigners so that they are truly immersed and integrated into the local culture (“VAP”). Even those who want to travel with a group of friends or church members can seek out trips that build relationships with hosts by looking for programs where volunteers spend most of their time engaging with the local people. Such trips typically involve staying with a host family, eating meals with locals, and interacting with natives during free time and leisure activities. All of these factors are important if volunteers hope to share any of their culture, skills, or knowledge with locals in a way that is humble and mutually beneficial.

Building long-term support for the host community is another goal of many short-term service trips abroad, but it can be fairly difficult to achieve. The Guatemalan doctors interviewed by Green strongly believed that short-term work *had* to be tied to long-term work, otherwise volunteers “might as well stay home” (9). For this reason, I encourage volunteers to look at trips where foreign volunteers work alongside long-term staff who permanently work in the host community. In Green’s example, the foreign doctors really needed to partner with local

doctors so that patients could receive follow up care, refill their prescriptions, etc. I also recommend checking to see if the foreign sending organization is supporting the host community/organization financially. For example, if a church is sending a mission team overseas each year but is not financially supporting the partner career missionary throughout the year, the trip is limited to fairly short-term support and impact.

These recommendations are certainly not foolproof in identifying trips abroad that help host communities, but I hope that potential volunteers will at least consider these factors as they prepare to take a short-term service trip abroad.

#### **Part 4c: Trips Designed Not To Harm Volunteers**

Disregarding factors such as safety that can cause harm in any kind of travel overseas, the greatest concern for volunteers in sending them on short-term service trips abroad is the risk of them returning with skewed perspectives of poverty and development. To avoid this, I urge those considering trips to look specifically for programs where volunteers are immersed in local culture and not isolated by spending all their time with other foreigners. This means living in the same community as the people whenever possible, spending the majority of one's time with natives, and seeking to build deep, cross-cultural relationships as mentioned above. Practically speaking, this means avoiding organizations like Cross Cultural Solutions, where volunteers live in an isolated and comfortable "Home Base" and work with locals for just 3 ½ hours a day, spending the rest of the time relaxing and exploring with the other foreign volunteers ("Cross Cultural Solutions"). Although these programs might not be bad as a whole, these types of living conditions and schedules create a separation between volunteers and locals that can make it very difficult to develop any real understanding of poverty or the people living in it.

#### **Part 4d: Trips Designed To Help Volunteers**

While I believe that a good short-term service trip abroad can have lifelong impacts on a volunteer, I have not identified specific methods of maximizing this benefit other than giving participants opportunities to reflect on what they are learning, as suggested by Swartzentruber. The authors of *When Helping Hurts* also mention this, suggesting that volunteer training should also include a post-trip element for reflection and discussion lasting up to a year after the trip (Chapter 7). Overall, though, I believe that more research is needed in this area in order to give any specific recommendations.

## **Conclusion**

Having carefully analyzed the case for and against short-term service trips abroad, I conclude that these trips have potential to cause serious harm to both host communities and volunteers. However, these trips also have the potential to do great good, so instead of condemning short-term service abroad altogether, we should help potential volunteers select trips that are most beneficial by thoroughly examining organizations that conduct such trips. My recommendations for short-term service trips abroad can be summarized in the 10 points below:

1. Volunteers should select trips with programs where the host organization employs at least some local staff and hires native people to do work for their projects when possible.
2. Volunteers should select trips where they can bring something to the host community that locals cannot provide.
3. Volunteers should avoid working with organizations that give free handouts.
4. Volunteers should undergo training before taking their service trip and have time set aside afterwards for reflection.
5. Volunteers should select trips where they will be at least moderately competent in their assigned tasks by looking for trips that utilize their skills, language, etc.
6. Volunteers should avoid trips where hosts are expected to provide tourism opportunities.
7. Volunteers should be flexible and select trips that focus on the host's goals and expressed needs instead of goals determined by foreigners.
8. Volunteers should select trips where they will have opportunities to train locals in practical skills and leadership roles.

9. Volunteers should select trips where most time is spent with locals, as opposed to with other volunteers. This includes time serving, eating, exploring, relaxing, etc.
10. Volunteers should select trips with organizations that are permanently stationed in the host community.

Although I cannot promise that a trip aligning with all ten of these statements will be beneficial and cause no harm, these recommendations can aid potential volunteers in their search for a short-term service trip abroad that will address poverty without causing harm. It is my hope that, by bringing to light both sides of this argument and making practical recommendations for potential volunteers, the millions of people volunteering abroad can truly begin to change the world. And for the better.

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