

Confessions of a 'Voluntourist'

Elizabeth Cosgrove

In August of last year, a few weeks after my return to Scotland from RTU where I spent five weeks with eleven other British volunteers building houses for families in G. Kallupatti, the VSO suggested that so called young British "voluntourists" could actually do more harm than good in the communities they sought to help. VSO UK director Judith Brodie even went so far as to say that in some cases "young people would be better off travelling and experiencing different cultures" than participating in a volunteering project. While it is most certainly true that many gap year projects and other volunteering programs ultimately benefit no-one other than the travel companies who organise them, I feel it is wrong to tar every project with the same brush. Similarly at home here in Britain there are many people who try to argue that the money we raised for air fares to India would be far better spent if it was given to RTU directly instead or who claim that the money used for our accommodation and food could have and should have been used to employ local workers rather than a group of young, affluent and inexperienced Britons. While such points may seem valid, I feel that they show fundamental misunderstanding of the point of the Lasallian Developing World Projects and many other reputable volunteering programs abroad.

Firstly, while organisations such as RTU constantly need money to fund many worthwhile projects, sometimes throwing money at an organisation is simply not enough. While a cheque for a six figure sum may spell relief that money may not be such a worry for a short time, a cheque for a smaller amount plus twelve young volunteers spells hope. Hope because this shows that there are people who care about the plight of the poor in village India, and it is through care and compassion, heartfelt fundraising and awareness, the instillation of a sense of duty to those less fortunate in the next generation that the problems facing the developing world will begin to be solved. An open wallet says and does a lot, but I feel that open hearts and minds say much more. Money may pay for a new swing set for the children of Anbu Ilam but a young person, perhaps a future politician, policy writer or decision maker, travelling many miles from their home and family to spend time pushing an orphaned Indian child on a swing shows love and sacrifice and hope for the future. This is not to

belittle the benefit of money for charities and other organisations but cold hard cash is not the be all and end all and sometimes compassion can be just as, if not more, valuable.

Two years ago I spent five weeks in Rwanda and I was shocked to hear the young people discuss their country and culture as though it was something to be ashamed of. My home country is far from perfect but I am proud to be Scottish and to be part of a rich cultural heritage. I believe this sense of self and national worth is so important for future development. When you are proud of something, you are eager to share it and to improve it. I believe that this pride comes in part from other people's interest in your country and your culture. By travelling many thousands of miles to experience life in India, we show that we at least believe that India and Indian culture are something to be proud of and to preserve. Just as a friend being interested in Scottish music makes me eager to share it with them, so too a young British person visiting Tamil Nadu and learning how to tie a sari or how to count to ten in Tamil shows respect for the Indian culture and generates a sense of worth in people who may feel that because of their country's shortcomings, its differences from the affluent west should be suppressed rather than celebrated. It is this feeling of cultural and national pride that, I feel, plays a huge part in provoking a desire for development and improvement and such a change in attitude is utterly essential if a country is to work its way out of poverty. Policies and plans will only go so far if people are apathetic and do not feel their culture and country are worth showing to the world. Tourists, whether they be volunteers or otherwise, can help to encourage pride and this, I feel, is one of the many steps along the road to a brighter future for a poor country.

Of course, it is not only the community who benefit from a Lasallian Project but also the volunteers themselves. Meeting and living among the poor has a tremendous impact on everyone fortunate enough to do so. I have found that such trips abroad tend to foster activism and to produce a group of young people determined to fight for change upon return to their own country. That fight is made all the more heartfelt by the fact that we are no longer campaigning for faceless poor children from across the globe but for Vasumathi and Jothi

and Raul and all the other children we came to know and to love. We are thus I feel more likely to continue fighting until justice is served because of our personal links to India. Not only that, but by sharing our experiences with others not lucky enough to travel to the developing world, we ignite in them too a desire for change and equality. And so begins a chain of many voices eager to make a difference. Perhaps this is merely a drop in the ocean but even a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Apathy towards the plight of the poor of our world must be tackled at grass-roots level and by allowing us to educate people at home after we have been educated on a project, our time spent in the third world helps us to begin this long and difficult task.

Apart from the wider benefits of going on a project, there are many personal and emotional benefits too. Going away for five weeks to a foreign country with eleven other people you barely know teaches tolerance of others and acceptance of views different from your own. Navigating various international airports and working together to build twelve houses also illustrates the importance of teamwork, friendship and helps to develop a sense of selflessness. Such traits, I feel, are important for anyone on the brink of adulthood. Spending time with those less fortunate also helps to put your own life and problems into perspective. As we left RTU I hoisted my rucksack, which I could barely carry at the start of the project, onto my back and realised it was a much easier burden to bear. "It must have got

lighter" I joked to a friend. "Or perhaps you have just got stronger" she replied. This short exchange summed up how I felt at the end of my time in RTU – my load had got lighter but I had become stronger and I know I would not have gained that kind of perspective and inner strength had I simply gone travelling and experienced different cultures as Judith Brodie suggests. Similarly, on returning home many other burdens, which may have seemed like huge problems before, were far easier to bear. Time spent in the developing world doing charity work also often teaches us what true happiness is and where it is found – not necessarily with a high flying career, an exotic lifestyle and an endless stream of cash – but rather when surrounded by friends, waking up to sunshine, doing something useful. In addition my time in RTU led me to have great appreciation of the value of education, something I feel is becoming lost in modern Britain where so much is taken for granted. In short then, what began as a journey to help those less fortunate ended up as a personal and emotional journey to becoming, I hope, a better person. I defy anyone who claims this was not worthwhile.

In conclusion, although we are right to be wary of "voluntourism" and must be careful to ensure that volunteering abroad is useful and beneficial for both the community and the individual, as Mother Teresa once said, "we can do no great things, only small things with great love" and the worth of such small things should never be underestimated.