Be Sugar in Milk: Local Perspectives on Volunteer Tourism in India and Uganda

by

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Abstract

This research explores the ways in which volunteer tourism is perceived by local volunteer coordinators in communities in India and Uganda. It highlights the importance of forming a more nuanced understanding of local agency, particularly in relation to community-based tourism. Participants from Indian and Ugandan NGOs speak to what they perceive is the role, value, and purpose of hosting Western volunteers and illustrate some of the benefits and challenges. Postcolonial theory and equity theory are applied to evaluate what is still a highly inequitable global tourism structure, while alerting the reader to how some individuals are exercising control over this form of alternative tourism. By drawing on the link between development and tourism, this study explores the critical issues that participants reveal and closes with three design principles for Northern sending agencies, Southern host organizations, and volunteer tourists to consider in order that volunteer tourism may best benefit receiving communities.

Key words: Alternative tourism, Volunteer tourism, India, Uganda, Development, Equity Theory, Postcolonial Theory
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Be Sugar in Milk: Local Perspectives on Volunteer Tourism in India and Uganda.

The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (2011) tells us that “over the decades, tourism has experienced continued growth and deepening diversification to become one of the fastest growing economic sectors in the world” (para. 1). It follows that no matter how we look at tourism, we are confronting a massively influential force. Alternative tourism is a fraction of this colossal industry and stands in contrast to the crass cultural and environmental destruction with which mass tourism is typically charged. While alternative tourism (and within it volunteer tourism) continues to develop, its significance lies in its sheer rate of growth, the changes it indicates in tourists, and the implications it holds for receiving communities. The following will look closely at local perspectives on the value of volunteer tourism, the degree of intercultural and international equity between volunteer tourists and receiving communities, and volunteer tourism’s precarious potential as a form of development for communities in India and Uganda.

Volunteer tourism has been criticized as an enactment of the Western tourist’s desire to assuage guilt, feel good about oneself, build resumes, or otherwise gain cultural capital. It has also been deemed a de-commodified peace offering. All contradictions aside, coming to any general conclusion cannot do justice to the range of perspectives around volunteer tourism, whether from the viewpoint of the tourist or the receiving community. By contributing to the work of filling in the gaps in this ongoing discussion, this study introduces the views of volunteer coordinators who regularly host volunteer tourists, and sketches out the critical role of the cultural mediator, whose voice is often missed in the scholarship on volunteer tourism. To be sure, some of their insights confirm postcolonial critiques of how the volunteer tourist, convinced of her altruism, falls into the trap of trivializing development, indulging in self-centered self-sacrifice, and relaxing into narratives of innocence. This study embraces a critical framework informed by both postcolonial theory and equity theory in order to unsettle the position of the volunteer tourist as a neutral agent of benevolent aid. It proposes to re-centre the receiving
communities as crucial points of reference whose perspectives must be heard for any accurate assessment of the usefulness of volunteer tourism to take place.

Development and tourism scholars can underestimate or misinterpret the degree of agency that NGOs in receiving communities, in particular, bring to their interactions with volunteer tourists. Acknowledging receiving organizations as active agents is key to forming a fully nuanced picture of the state of volunteer tourism and the opportunities it presents to both the tourist and the host, however vulnerable the reach of that agency may seem in relation to the greater economic agency of cultural outsiders. While volunteer tourism entails inequitable relations between volunteers and locals, locals have developed strategies to assess whether the benefits of welcoming outsiders into community projects outweigh the costs. The data I present here will make clear that receiving communities know how to make strategic use of tourism to further their own endogenous development agenda, and that each community will invite and respond to the opportunities of volunteer tourism according to their own historical, cultural, political and economic context. In recognizing this, I temper such conclusions with consistent acknowledgement of the neo-colonial underpinnings inherent in this form of tourism.

To develop this argument, I first define key terms. I then outline the methodological base for my claims, followed by a discussion of my research methods and my own positionality as a researcher. I then review trends in the literature on traditional and alternative forms of tourism, through the lens of postcolonial theory. I will problematize postcolonial critics’ sweeping discredit of volunteer tourism through both a discussion of equity theory and the integration of interview data that confirms the relevance of equity theory to a discussion of the costs and benefits of volunteer tourism to host communities. I then move towards considering how tourism and development overlap. The remainder of this thesis uses interview data to flesh out my contention that, under conditions where host communities are in control of the selection, orientation and management of volunteer tourists, both the visitor and the host community may gain from the cultural, economic and interpersonal exchange. I conclude by offering three design principles meant to lay bare the structural inequalities of even the
alternative tourism industry, so that those involved in volunteer tourism may more self-consciously plan, implement, and partake in intercultural exchanges and service opportunities in a manner that benefits receiving communities. Lastly, I suggest ways forward for future research.

**Definitions**

To discuss volunteer tourism, there are a few distinctions that need to be made in relation to what a volunteer tourist does and who is directing the flow of volunteers. Wearing (2001) defines volunteer tourism as applying to those tourists “who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of the society or environment” (p. 1). While Wearing conflates conservation volunteer work with community-based projects involving people, the study at hand is concerned only with the latter. Volunteer tourism, as it is addressed here, refers to projects based in communities and immersed in cross-cultural encounters.

A ‘sending agency’ refers to the Northern-based travel company that coordinates volunteer placements primarily through the internet. Sending agencies are essentially tour companies, with the capacity to connect tourists to volunteer projects around the world. I use this term to distinguish between Northern-located sending agencies and Southern-located host organizations. A ‘host organization’, on the other hand, is on the receiving end of volunteers, either by coordination through a sending agency or through its own website. The term host, in this context, has been criticized for presuming that the receiving community is in a position of control over who comes and what they do (Mowforth & Munt, 2003; Salazar, 2004). In the case of the respondents herein, most are exercising control and/or inviting volunteers, and thus host organization is appropriate. Nonetheless, non-governmental organization (NGO) will be used interchangeably with host organization.

In consideration of the shifting terminology around ‘First world’/‘Third world’ (now commonly out of vogue), ‘Developed’/ ‘Developing’ (unable to deal with the disparity within countries, or that all countries are always developing), and ‘Minority’/‘Majority’ (although compelling, sometimes confusing),
I will pass over these. More economically developed countries/Less economically developed countries will be used instead, as well as North/South (although not geographically precise). This recognizes that any terms that divide the world into two are problematic and that new ones will continue to arise. The term ‘Westerner’ is employed broadly to refer to those who come from a culture influenced by the Renaissance and Enlightenment movements, and travel from Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand. Finally, *mzungu*, *muzungu*, and *bazungu*, are used herein, meaning white person/white people in Kiswahili and Luganda respectively. Incidentally, *mzungu* is also used in East Africa to describe an employer, or one who pays.

**Methodology and Research Methods**

My overarching research question is this: How do host communities in India and Uganda interpret the role, value, and purpose of secular volunteer tourists, whereby Westerners seeking cross-cultural experiences, travel far distances and pay to volunteer?

I have chosen to approach this study as a question rather than a problem to be solved (Wilson, 2008), so as not to proliferate negative stereotypes about Western volunteer tourists, or alternately, about people in less economically developed countries. Wilson (2008) explains that “researching the negative is focusing on and giving more power to disharmony. Its focus is alienation or lack of relationships and does nothing to form relations but rather can tear them apart” (p. 109). Although the data shows that uniform summaries are unrealistic, approaching volunteer tourism as a question means we focus on the potential for the emergence of relationships between people in places, rather than differences between irreconcilable strangers. Further, it means we listen first, before making assumptions.

To that end, my overarching theoretical paradigm is social constructivism, nuanced by critical theory, particularly, a postcolonial critique of tourism. Social constructivism recognizes that “the ways in which we commonly understand the world, the categories and concepts we use, are historically and culturally specific” (Burr, 1995, p. 3). Tribe (2005) explains how “since it is not possible to understand tourism prior to acculturation or outside of any culture, reflecting on cultural situatedness helps to
understand the consequences of this fact” (p. 2). As such, this study highlights multiple and fluid experiences, shifting perspectives, and conditional realities, seeking to explore not resolve. Wilson (2008) asserts that critical theory, “offers an alternative to the positivist and post-positivist view in that it holds that reality is more fluid or plastic than one fixed truth” (p. 36). In this fluid view, “critical theorists contend that reality has been shaped into its present form by our cultural, gender, social and other values” (Wilson, 2008, p. 36). A critical social constructivist approach is appropriate due to how I framed my questions and how I impacted the responses I received, as I represent something beyond my control when interviewing. The constructivist view accepts that this representation of myself is experienced by my respondents in various ways depending on the positionality of the respondent, and that this encounter is conditional, presupposed by respondents’ previous encounters with other volunteer tourists, whom I immediately resemble. This research, by departing from framing the phenomenon of volunteer tourism as a problem, takes into account the dynamism of the hosts’ experiences. Wilson contends “constructivism takes the ontology of a fluid reality one step further in the belief that there is not merely one fluid reality, but many realities specific to the people and locations that hold them” (p. 37). This study seeks to listen to those experiential realities and thus expand the various discourses that comprise the literature on alternative and volunteer tourism.

A component of my methodological stance is to pay particular attention to my positionality in this research. Edward Said (1983) asks “Who writes? For whom is the writing being done?” (p. 1). I write in honour of the perspectives of those I spoke with, who shared with me – an outsider – their experiences with outsiders, and whose views have been ironically underrepresented in the literature. I also write for my immediate audience here in Canada, as a volunteer tourist source country, and for myself, as a former volunteer tourist who once took part in a questionable placement. In addition, I write in respect of the spirit of volunteerism and refrain from deriding it, and by doing so, I recognize volunteerism from the standpoint of my own culture. Nonetheless, the danger of imposing one’s agenda onto people in less economically developed countries is that it can replicate the violence of a not-so-
distant colonial past. The desire to give voice to others is also dangerous and Madison’s approach to critical ethnography is a guiding principle in this regard. Madison (2005) explains:

The performance of possibility does not arrogantly assume that we exclusively are giving voice to the silences, for we understand that they speak and have been speaking in spaces and places often foreign to us. Nor are we assuming that we possess the unequivocal knowledge and skills to enable people to intervene in injustice – or that they have not been intervening through various other forms all the time. (p. 178)

Following Madison, this research acknowledges the inherent inequity in the practice of most tourism today, while also recognizing that people on tourism’s receiving end are intervening in injustice in ways that can make tourism work for them. Thus this research is not ‘giving voice to the silences’, but is listening to their interventions. Still, my race is so inevitably in this research that respondents often talk about “you guys”, conflating me with every other white person. It follows that in the first place my position is that of a white Canadian woman with the disposable resources to fly to India and Uganda and undertake research. In recognition of how I am perceived in both India and Uganda, I have an enduring suspicion of my own role as a researcher, and how that role “constructs me in ways that I do not even understand or I may not accept” (Madison, 2005, p. 100). Seeking answers from locals that experience volunteer tourism is the approach taken, although this recognizes the assumption that Westerners, such as myself, have the unquestioned right to research others. I also recognize that the questions posed are mine, and by framing the discussion I resonate through it and this sets the stage for their responses.

My approach parallels, to some extent, that of the typical volunteer tourist as I parachuted in and out of the communities I visited, often with little more knowledge of the host organization than what I could locate on their websites. During preparation for the fieldwork, I communicated with several sending agencies who acted as gatekeepers to the host organizations, and who commonly denied me access once realizing I was not a customer. Thus I followed a chain sampling strategy, with selection being random in relation to gaining permission to meet with volunteer coordinators of approximately
half of the organizations I contacted. All organizations but one are accessible online, either through a sending organization or their own website, and my approach reflected any potential volunteer tourists’ way of finding a placement. The one organization that does not have a website was referred to me by word-of-mouth, also reflecting how one might locate a volunteer placement. Although my purpose was not to become a volunteer tourist, I mention this to illustrate the accessibility of these projects, and thus how representative they may be.

The fieldwork included three weeks in India, followed by nearly three weeks in Uganda. During this, representatives from nine organizations were interviewed. This “quick and dirty ethnography” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995) is reflective of “an age of mass communication and globalizing cultures” (Burns & Barrie, 2005, p. 471), in which much of the initial contact was done online followed by brief periods in each country and at each organization. In other words, “the ethnography was not of the traditional stay-for-as-long-as-you-want type, as the phenomena of interest were short-term projects of volunteering” (Palacios, 2010, p. 864-5). This is qualitative participant action research, with data collected through open-ended interviews, ranging from 45 minutes to two and half hours, following the Patton model (Patton, 2002). One interview resulted in speaking with four participants and another with two. Altogether I spoke with seven women and six men. Respondents were provided with a letter explaining the purpose of the thesis, their rights as participants, and a confirmation of their anonymity. Interviews were conducted in English, recorded, and later transcribed and thematically coded.

This is a multi-sited research project, which draws on NGOs in India and Uganda, which are connected through their experiences of colonialism, yet differ vastly on innumerable other accounts. Further, this ethnography is a “partial, situated and selective production[]” (Ellis & Bochner, 1996, p. 21), and represents a fraction of happenings in the expansive and unregulated field of volunteer tourism. Rather than going to distant lands seeking to interpret the ways of foreign cultures, this is an attempt to look critically at ambassadors from my own culture, through the eyes of volunteer coordinators from Indian and Ugandan NGOs. I withhold attempting to interpret Indian or Ugandan cultures. As an
outsider, I cannot hope to understand the systems of meaning that comprise these cultures. Rather, I focus on how they experience Western culture, and their thoughts on what transpires when outsiders unaware of their socio-cultural realities enter their world.

Although I have myself volunteered in India, I chose India and Uganda for this study due to a combination of two circumstances. One was a residency in India relating to my Masters program, and the other a project monitoring trip to Uganda relating to my occupation. My visits to India and Uganda happened in direct succession, during which I simultaneously conducted this research. While I began this research with relatively more background knowledge of India, I was located during this fieldwork in a significantly different region of India than where I had myself volunteered. This meant my interview questions were designed based on my own experience of volunteering in a more ‘traditional’ town in Tamil Nadu, with less familiarity with tourists, whereas the feedback I received from Goa reflected a high level of familiarity with tourists. My connection to Uganda is more recent, although I had identified two of the organizations interviewed in an earlier attempt to volunteer there, years ago.

I met with five NGOs in India, and four in Uganda, which collectively reported receiving volunteers from the US, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and several European countries. One of the NGOs in India received Diaspora volunteers (non-resident Indians) only, and will be discussed separately. Each organization in India and Uganda worked with vulnerable children, women and/or marginalized communities. Almost all NGOs reported hosting more female than male volunteers, and all recognized a trend of increasing applicants. Two of the interviews in India were with expatriates, one who had founded an organization and the other as a staff member of an Indian NGO. It is useful to note, that while volunteer tourism is sometimes used derogatively to denote a form of international volunteering deemed superficial and commercialized, others employ it proudly. It is best to understand that not all of the organizations interviewed here use the term themselves, while all host Western volunteers with minimum stays ranging from two weeks to three months.

**Trends in the Literature**
Mass Tourism

In the latter half of the 20th century, social, economic, technological and political shifts resulted in a rapid increase in tourism, and through a combination of increased leisure time, lower airline costs, and higher disposable income (Young, 2008) this created a culture of tourists in the West. Wearing and Wearing (2001) assert that tourism “serves to provide a free area, a mental and physical escape from the immediacy of the multiplicity of impinging pressures in technological society and, as such, holiday experiences provide a scope for the nurturance and cultivation of human identity” (p. 150). However, this now outdated view displays a one-sided analysis, which presumes tourism only involves tourists. In fact, not only is traditional tourism an inequitable activity, it has long been linked to an elaborate list of negative impacts. Gladstone (2005) explains, if it does not “eradicate the local culture and society completely, international tourism development commodifies and disrupts traditional cultures, degrades the environment, and often leads to increased criminal activity, rising levels of drug and alcohol abuse by local inhabitants, and social unrest” (p. 54). Many critiques of mass tourism have focused on the lack of local involvement, whereby through foreign ownership of hotels, airlines, and booking agencies, tourists are essentially leaving their wallets behind (Cleverdon & Kalisch, 2000). Various studies assess rates of leakage, due to foreign ownership, from 50-90 per cent of the total cost of a holiday (Lepp, 2008; Trewby, 2007; Wearing 2001), making traditional mass tourism for less economically developed countries a debatable path towards development. Speaking to the cultural impacts, Salazar (2004) explains:

Tourists to developing countries often participate in a voyeuristic consumption of poverty, taking advantage of the photogenic aspects of it. The consequences of this tourist colonialism are no less deep-seated or penetrating than the more familiar economic and political expression of colonialism. The camera substitutes for the gun and tourists shoot their pictures and capture images in order to make their photo albums into trophies; vision becomes supervision. (p. 102) While such scathing critiques of mass tourism are echoed by several authors, others contend that mass tourism can boost a country’s economy while containing tourists in designated enclaves, keeping them
from impacting surrounding cultures and environments. Whether or not one ascribes to mass tourism as voyeuristic, and ultimately colonial, it is this context from which alternative tourism has spawned.

Alternative Tourism

While mass tourism is today viewed by many as tacky and hedonist, it still comprises the bulk of the industry. Nonetheless, alongside it has emerged alternative tourism, aimed at redressing mass tourism’s many faults. Alternative tourism allows tourists to view the destination as an “interactive space where tourists become creative actors who engage in behaviours that are mutually beneficial” (Lyons & Wearing, 2008, p. 6). Many definitions exist, but alternative tourism is generally understood as “a market-differentiated and an ideologically divergent form of tourism that is considered preferable to mass tourism and is more sustainable” (McIntosh & Zahra, 2007a, p. 541). Alternative tourism manifests in such niches as ecotourism, responsible tourism, community-based tourism, pro-poor tourism, fair trade tourism, volunteer tourism and justice tourism. McIntosh and Zahra (2007a) consider such niches as reflective of people’s “increasing recognition and reaction to the homogenous nature of traditional tourism products as well as their increasing desire for altruism, self-change and an ability to confirm their identities and provide coherence within an uncertain and fragmented postmodern life” (p. 542). Young people in the West now commonly travel between high school, university and/or employment. Most popular in the UK, this break is coined the ‘gap year’, in which youth take a ‘year out’ to explore the world, gain experience, and engage in alternative tourism. While assessing these tourists’ motives is intriguing, it still situates the discussion on one side of the phenomenon.

When ecotourism arrived on the scene in the 1980s and 1990s it was held up as a “morally superior alternative to mass tourism, one that allows tourists and the tourism industry to alleviate rather than contribute to local environmental and economic woes” (Grey & Campbell, 2007, p. 465). More recently, ecotourism has been critiqued as privileging Western environmental values and science, or ‘green imperialism’, as host destinations are required to supply and comply with tourists’ expectations of an Edenic nature. Accordingly, “ecotourism destinations must exemplify Nature, Exotic, and or Simple”
(Grey & Campbell, 2007, p. 465), and this can place severe pressure on communities holding different relationships with the land than their Western customers demand. Nonetheless, ecotourism initially held so much allure that tour companies, NGOs, and supranational organizations alike took up its cause. Despite the criticism that subsequently arose, and the common misuse of the term, ecotourism is growing at three times the rate of the tourism industry as a whole (Salters & Everette, 2005, p. 5). Yet sustainability, the hallmark of ecotourism, has been criticized as an ideological discourse that primarily serves Western interests (Mowforth & Munt, 2003). Several authors have asked whether sustainability in relation to ecotourism refers to sustainability of the environment or the sustainability of tourism. For example, it is now clear that “sustainability for the residents of the leafy suburbs of Vancouver, London or Melbourne is considerably different from that of local tourist destination communities in Bali, Bolivia or Uganda” (Mowforth & Munt, 2003, p. 299). In a glaring polarization, Gladstone (2005) notes, “the hypocrisy of ecotourism and other nature-based ‘solutions’... is not lost on the people of the South, who often cannot afford the entry fees to parks and nature preserves in their own communities” (p. 200).

Nonetheless, there are clear indications in recent decades that some people (alternative tourists) “are doing tourism differently” (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2010, p. 199). As a movement, alternative tourism has “sought empowerment for local communities, meaningful experiences for tourists, protection for environments, and a more responsible and sustainable tourism sector” (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2010, p. 199). Alternative tourism is an ideological project in which some proponents hold a “radical agenda not only to overturn an inequitable, unjust and unsustainable tourism system, but envision such efforts as a catalyst for a more humanistic form of globalization” (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2008, p. 347). In discussing the alternative tourist’s desire to connect, Young (2008) explains how “proposed means for cultural immersion involve[ ] not simply getting beyond tourism but, indeed, getting beyond travel, for example by volunteering” (p. 206). While the alternative tourist stands behind this quest for cultural immersion as a signifier of their status as distinct from the mass tourist, Tourism Concern, an industry watchdog, notes how even as well-meaning travellers we “still bring our Western values and hang-ups; the value we place
on money and material gain; our cynicism; our secular scepticism; our belief in individual freedom over communal obligations; our liberal attitudes towards sex and drugs, and so on” (Mann, 2000, p. 30).

**Volunteer Tourism**

Volunteer tourism has arisen as one of the most popular forms of alternative tourism. While volunteer tourism initially appeared to provide a perfect combination, with willing workers travelling to ‘needy’ communities, much subsequent literature has focused on scrutinizing its altruistic premise (Callanan & Thomas, 2005; Lewis, 2005; Simpson, 2004; Sin, 2009). In doing so, a central trend has been to concentrate on the volunteer tourists’ motives (Broad, 2003; Brown & Morrison, 2003; Campbell & Smith, 2006; Halpenny & Caissie, 2003; McGehee & Norman, 2002; McGehee & Santos, 2005; McIntosh & Zahra, 2007b; Mustonen, 2005; Stoddart & Rogerson, 2004; Wearing, 2001), despite that such motives have little relevance as to whether the activity meets the objectives it claims. This may be an outgrowth of the broader trend in tourism studies to rely on typologies and definitions to reach understandings of tourism practices. Yet, Wearing, Stevenson, and Young (2010) note “it is now widely accepted that the typological approach to tourism fails to address a range of important social, cultural and environmental considerations” (p. 34). It may also reflect a marketing goal that seeks to appeal to the desires of volunteer tourists regardless of whether the practice is beneficial (Guttentag, 2009). The less common approach has been to ask locals how they view the changes occurring in their communities, although some researchers have more recently addressed this (Hervik, 2008; McGehee & Andereck, 2009; McIntosh & Zahra, 2008; Nelson, 2010; Sin, 2010). Still, few if any, have taken a multi-sited and multi-project approach. Alongside the emphasis on the volunteer tourists’ motives, the phenomenon is recognized as dramatically expanding (Chen & Chen, 2011; Gray & Campbell, 2007; Higgins-Desbiolles & Russell-Mundine, 2008; Lyons & Wearing, 2008; Mustonen, 2005; Raymond & Hall, 2008).

There are now online databases which assist potential volunteers in selecting their desired volunteer vacation with a growing variety of options appearing as a testament to its popularity. However,
what becomes clear from surveying these databases, such as GoAbroad.com, is that volunteer tourism is increasingly difficult to define. Callanan and Thomas (2005) explain:

The concept does not differentiate between say, a 16 year old participating on a 2 week project, with no specific skills and qualifications, who ‘observes’ the work of others and with no direct contribution to the local community/environment, compared to a 30 year old qualified builder who engages in a 6-month project training the local community how to build local facilities, where there is a clear, direct and active contribution to the local community/environment. (p. 195-6)

Despite this ambiguity around the volunteer identity, a volunteer vacation can be framed as a “chance to contribute to the restoration of natural environments and to address social problems while simultaneously building a self-identity based upon caring relationships, rather than iconoclastic individualism and the isolating selfishness that capitalism fosters” (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2008, p. 349). It has been credited with building a sense of global citizenship (McGehee & Santos, 2005), and through forming cross-cultural relationships, acting as a catalyst for peace (Mustonen, 2005). With the volunteer undergoing transformative shifts in personal values (Ingram, 2008), and noted benefits for hosts (McIntosh & Zahra, 2007a), volunteer tourism is claimed “to provide a more reciprocally beneficial form of travel in which both the volunteer and the host communities are able to gain from the experience” (Raymond & Hall, 2008, p. 531). Defined as an implicit protest against the commoditization of cultures (Mustonen, 2005), volunteer tourism “attempts to bring the humanistic and ecological values and impacts of tourism into focus and thus it may serve as a challenge to the dominant neoliberal paradigm that currently holds sway” (Higgins-Desbiolles & Russell-Mundine, 2008, p. 182).

Types of volunteer tourism projects vary widely, but most commonly include community development, conservation, construction, and teaching. Placements are typically carried out by in-country NGOs, with the itinerary and logistics arranged by Northern-based sending agencies, but increasingly the internet is enabling Southern-based NGOs to manage the entire process, which is the
case in three of the nine organizations interviewed here. Either way, it has been argued that in contrast to sending agencies, “the decommodified philosophy that underpins NGOs who provide volunteer tourism is essential for ensuring that the needs of host communities are placed before the bottom line of transnational corporations who have vested interest in commercializing volunteer tourism products” (Lyons & Wearing, 2008, p. 6). As such, NGOs have been held up as demonstrating best practice in volunteer tourism (Lyons & Wearing, 2008). NGOs have mandates distinct from hosting volunteer tourists and are locally integrated in ways that sending agencies (tour companies) are by nature not.

While some authors tend towards presenting a sunny picture of the transformative (for the volunteer) potential in volunteer tourism, others have raised the issues of cultural imperialism stating “these short-timers take home more from their slumming in the Third World than they leave behind for the underprivileged they are supposed to help” (Kwa, 2007, para. 4), or worse, that volunteer tourism results in a “curtailment of self-sufficiency in communities” (McIntosh & Zahra, 2007a, p. 554). It has also been noted that it cannot be assumed that volunteering overseas leads to cross-cultural understanding and that voluntourism may even confirm previously held stereotypes (Raymond & Hall, 2008; Simpson, 2004). This is exacerbated when volunteers, purposely or unwittingly, “take on roles of ‘expert’ or ‘teacher’ regardless of their experience or qualifications” (Raymond & Hall, 2008, p. 531).

Researchers are discovering that in order to pursue responsible tourism, the host community’s view is fundamental to any project (McIntosh & Zahra, 2008; Wearing, McDonald, & Ponting, 2005). While some argue that alternative tourism is being “co-opted by a defensive tourism industry” (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2008, p. 345), this does not implicitly mean it should be abandoned. Rather, it can be said that the larger tourism industry’s incorporation of responsible tourism language is a testament to its importance. Equally, it has been argued that as long as tourism takes place within this neoliberal global economy, “even the best community tourism projects will never be perfect” (Mann, 2000, p. 4). Thus, despite whether an ideally integrated, locally controlled, alternative tourism project is always the result, there is the intention to do tourism differently. This is a radical shift in how tourism operates, and, while
far from perfect, this move in awareness contributes to the transformation of an industry. As the boundaries of volunteer tourism are in flux, different stakeholders – governments, NGOs, tour companies – are turning towards its potential as a promising solution to a range of social and environmental issues (Lyons & Wearing, 2008). Thus, volunteer tourism has the potential to be delivered in ways that either meet its mandate, or compromise it. The degree to which it benefits receiving communities ultimately depends on their level of control.

A Postcolonial Lens on Volunteer Tourism

Postcolonial theory is a complex body of work which recognizes that “in countries constituted by a colonial past – whether it is the Americas, Asia, or Africa – postcolonialism entails all culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present” (Madison, 2005, p. 47). This study takes a postcolonial lens to the practice of volunteer tourism, but also questions that lens through the commentary of respondents. By focusing on the experiences of locals, it relocates the discussion by moving the seat of interpretive power away from the volunteer and towards the receiving community. Some of their insights do temper the postcolonial critique of volunteer tourism, negating the view that it is necessarily, universally, or simplistically neo-colonial. Still, bringing a postcolonial lens to volunteer tourism questions its perpetuation of Westerners’ uncontested involvement in implementing the ‘correct’ course of development overseas. Thus, my stance follows that of Canton and Santos (2009), who express that while “formal, political colonialism is no longer in existence in most of the world, postcolonial scholars nevertheless recognize and seek to call attention to the power imbalances that exist on economic and ideological levels between the West and the Rest” (p. 193).

In Being White, Being Good, Applebaum (2010) introduces a white complicity pedagogy. She explains how for white people to ally themselves with victims of racism, “white people have to acknowledge their complicity. This means being vigilant about white moral agency because such moral agency can ironically obstruct a genuine engagement with those who experience racial oppression” (Applebaum, 2010, p. 6). While Applebaum is referring to teaching social justice courses in America, the
complexities of race transcend the context. She explains, “the required notion of responsibility must be able to aim a critical gaze on white desires for moral goodness and innocence” (Applebaum, 2010, p. 179). By introducing an example from a classroom setting in which her students of color wished to have separate classes, while her white students desired combined classes, she writes, “the white students were unaware but also unwilling to recognize that what they perceived as an empathetic desire functioned as a type of absolution” (Applebaum, 2010, p. 91). In summary, “white people cannot rely on their good intentions in order to know how their discourse affects others” (Applebaum, 2010, p. 92). The same vigilance around moral agency is required in order that volunteer tourists learn to be allies, not leaders.

One aspect of postcolonial theory concerns the politics of representation in tourism marketing and the power moves inherent in not just discourse, but imagery and media. Travel marketing has a history of essentializing cultures by infusing the exotic, the simple and the serene. In alternative tourism, tour operators tend to perpetuate such images and this equips the voluntourist with an armful of mythical representations of what poverty looks like, and what their role is in fixing it. In assessing the promotional material produced by one study abroad program, Canton and Santos (2009) explain:

Representation of hosts as traditional and as racially/ethnically distinct is problematic for multiple reasons. First, portraying hosts exclusively in traditional clothing, engaging in traditional activities, masks the dynamism of their cultures, presenting them as people who have not yet ‘embraced modernity’—people who live in places where time stands still. The overall impression one is left with is that of two very different worlds colliding—one simple, primitive, unchanging, and closely tied to nature; the other capable of manipulating the world’s resources to produce complex technologies that allow human lifestyles to be constantly changing shape. (p. 199)

What is problematic here is that “if the rest of the world is pure, authentic, and unchanged, then the slate is clean and the great exotic beyond is available to be ‘discovered’ all over again by a new generation of Western college students” (Caton & Santos, 2009, p. 200). If uniformed about postcolonial theory or the history of a given country, the volunteer tourists’ enthusiasm (and moral agency) can effectively gloss
over the fact that no one arrives in neutral territory. Canton and Santos (2009) contend, “the portrayal of hosts as always happy, always eagerly waiting to welcome Western visitors, masks the hardships that residents of poorer countries face and ignores their innate complexity as human beings” (p. 200).

Simpson (2004) explains how gap year volunteer tourism projects are based on a context of unexamined inequality. She asserts “the processes that allow young westerners to access the financial resources, and moral imperatives, necessary to travel and volunteer in a ‘third world country’, are the same as the ones that make the reverse process almost impossible” (Simpson, 2004, p. 690). Yet, through a surreal marketing campaign “the gap year industry largely attempts to maintain its right to operate in a ‘neutral’ environment, one seemingly without history” (Simpson, 2004, p. 690). Not only does selling humanitarianism involve activating such imagery, tour companies also employ loaded language. With claims to ‘making a difference’, ‘empowering communities’, and ‘changing the world’, the framework is set for volunteer tourists to greatly misinterpret their own capacity. For example, in researching two UK-based sending agencies, Hervik (2008) observes:

Through the volunteer-travel organisations’ self-presentations, the language of development, such as “empowerment” and “community development”, is mixed with the volunteer-travel sector [sic] own buzzwords, such as “make a difference”, “challenge”, and “experience”. This mixing and borrowing of conceptual frameworks appears to mediate the image of the volunteer-travel agencies as forms of community-development institutions. (p. 33)

Of course tour companies are usually not community-development institutions, and in terms of alternative travel providers that offer placements in countless countries, claims to a connection to the local community can run a little dry. Hervik (2008) explains, “an idealized picture of volunteer-travel is being presented to the volunteers, linked to a vague concept of ‘development’ and portrayed as an equally beneficial activity for all parts involved” (p. 52-3). Despite such rhetoric, Hervik (2008) found that grassroots NGOs in Tanzania had essentially no role in project design, volunteer recruitment, decision-making, or funding allocation, while being consistently termed a ‘partner’.
In considering the neo-colonial language in such media representations, it is useful here to reprint Hervik’s (2008) selection from one prominent sending organization’s website. This also happens to be the sending agency I used to contact one of the organizations interviewed in India. They claim:

**Your help is needed**

Many people may think that the need isn’t that great or that people should learn to help themselves but the truth is that the need for your help is enormous. Without the help many of these vital projects would have to close down and that would be disastrous for both local communities and endangered environments. It’s easy to underestimate how low the quality of life is for those in the developing world, especially if you’re living comfortably in a first world country, far from the realities of the real world. (i-to-i as cited in Hervik, 2008, p. 102)

This call to experience the ‘real world’ (read poverty) is dosed in language of entitlement and moral imperative. It also leaves the reader with a profound sense that their decision to volunteer abroad is vital to saving the ‘developing’ world. Interestingly, by speaking to locals from the communities he studied, Hervik (2008) discovered that “it did not seem as if they saw themselves as being exploited by the organisations” (p. 131). Several of my respondents confirmed this sentiment. Still, Hervik (2008) also found locals “did not appear to perceive the programmes as significantly ‘empowering’ their lives, as the romanticising perspective of volunteer-travel indicates” (p. 131). In other words, exploitation may be a little heavy handed, in some cases, but deluded notions of empowering ‘Others’ is a legacy of colonial language, and does demonstrate a disconnect between objectives and actual results.

To conclude this section, I wish to emphasize the limits of the postcolonial critique to the research question I posed for this study. The difficulty with applying postcolonial theory to a topic that seeks to ask a question, rather than resolve a problem, is that it has a paralytic effect that compromises our ability to move forward. It is paralytic in the sense that it restricts the individual from being an agent of change, of moving beyond inequitable dynamics, and from acting outside of macro-historical theories. Postcolonial theory rests on actions made in the past, and while these bear significant impact on the
present, a potentially less deterministic perspective is equity theory. Equity theory pertains to the present, and looks toward the future by focusing on the agency of the destination community as opposed to the agency of the offender (the colonialist). Equity theory also allows us to assess what is taking place at a more individual level. Where postcolonial theory has been critiqued for being too theoretical and lacking in application to everyday realities, equity theory deals with the day-to-day embodied workings of justice.

**Equity Theory as a Corrective to the Postcolonial Lens**

Equity theory suggests that “a stable state in social relationships and exchanges can only exist if there is a perceived balance between costs and rewards or more specifically between perceived inputs and outputs” (Kunkel, 1997, p. 137). This puts forward that those implicated in a relationship involving inputs and outputs, will assess the equity involved, and respond accordingly in keeping with a stable state. A ‘stable state’ may be impossible, given the diversity and lack of regulation in this form of tourism. However, the point here is the suggestion that remedial actions to attain an aspired balance are possible. Equity theory rests on the premise that “it is the judgement of the participant and not the outside observer which determines the relative worth of what they are giving and getting” (Pearce & Coghlan, 2008, p. 137). In focusing on the judgement of those involved, this theory has an emic foundation (Pearce & Coghlan, 2008). In relation, the NGOs interviewed here all respond to community needs and thus are closely connected to local issues. Working in such contexts, the NGOs are well-positioned to assess whether hosting volunteers is beneficial to their cause.

Pearce and Coghlan (2008) contend that “equity theory proposes that an imbalance between inputs and outputs leads to distress and people in such situations will seek to restore equity” (p.137). This distress, a kind of “negative post-transaction affect” (Oliver & Swan, 1989, p. 373), leads to dissatisfaction. To restore equity, one can either “elevate the value of the rewards they are receiving and work harder to get more rewards or decrease their own inputs and hence lower their costs” (Pearce & Coghlan, 2008, p. 137). Inputs and outputs may be of entirely different kinds, but an assessment and negotiation of the rewards is still possible (Pearce & Coghlan, 2008). According to equity theory, what
individuals will not do “is persist in a deeply inequitable relationship of exchange” (Pearce & Coghlan, 2008, p. 137). One might argue that people in less economically developed countries have no choice and are preyed upon by volunteer tourism developers, similar to how mass tourism unfolds.

While injustice is apparent in the very structure of foreigners holidaying in less economically developed countries, this reading may not appreciate the ways in which local residents choose to interpret tourism. Further, “the methods used to adapt to inequity appear to be linked to the perceived cost of restoring the inequity with most respondents redefining the situation if that is the easier route” (Greenburg; Miles et al. as cited in Pearce & Coghlan, 2008, p. 137). Feather (1999) explains how in assessing inequity there are varying sensitivities and “some individuals may be less troubled than others, possibly due to differences in the strength of their values such as fairness and belief in a just world” (p. 137). Lansing and De Vries (2007) point out that “the awareness of negative effects of tourism development by local residents thus does not necessarily reduce their acceptance and support of tourism” (p. 81). Commonly, volunteers will assist in purchasing land or buildings, fund programs, or develop projects beyond the scope of the volunteer stint. In order to reap these benefits, hosts do appear to find ways within the inequity to leverage what opportunities this tourism can bring.

Equity theory does not mend the inequitable structure upon which tourism rests, it simply challenges Western assumptions that recipient countries are not participating negotiators in volunteer tourism, making choices on whether the inputs and outputs remain worthy of their time. As the data from this research will suggest, some assessments of volunteer tourism as imposing neo-colonial ‘do-gooders’ upon local communities may rely too heavily on stereotypes, while also suggesting a passivity on the part of locals that is unwarranted. Local communities are not, as much literature contends, fragile recipients of all-powerful Western volunteers. For instance, when asked about their selection process, one Ugandan participant replied:

Originally we had a website. Another way would be word of mouth, like you. We get to know them, find out if they are good enough to work with us, then we’ll accept them. Or others, when
they come to work with another organization they don’t feel fulfilled there, or maybe the
condition is not good for them to stay. Then they apply to come work for us. (U1)

This comment reflects one NGO that has taken control of who they let into their organization, although personally assessing the volunteers is not a consistent practice across volunteer tourism. Rather, it does appear that tour companies are descending on NGOs in the South (and then assigning volunteers to them), as they clamber onto the voluntourism trend. Yet overemphasizing this also distracts from the fact that many Southern-based NGOs now advertise online and recruit volunteers independently. In these cases, host organizations can assess, and bear responsibility for, whoever they accept.

In terms of equity theory, what is essential to assessing if the risk of exploitation is high is to determine residents’ actual perspectives, an intuitive although rarely utilized strategy. It follows that if “good access to these perspectives exists, then presumably one would discover whether the residents believe they are in an unfair bargaining position owing to their poverty, or desire privacy for parts of their lives that are exposed to tourists” (Whyte, Selinger, & Outterson, 2010, p. 18). One would also discover that host organizations are aware of the inequities and are taking preventative measures to safeguard the communities that incoming volunteers work with. For example, the same Ugandan participant cited above explained how his organization managed a problematic behaviour that arose, by resisting the volunteers, and forming written policies:

We had volunteers who came and they said we should give children weekly allowances. Then I cautioned them on the danger, I told them here we do not give allowance to children and how long are you going to keep this? We don’t want to be involved. Well they said oh, we have enough money to do this, and we are teaching the children responsibility and in the end do something for themselves. But now they are not around, and then the kids are asking you for allowances. You know, so those are things we agree on verbally, and probably that is the reason we are coming up with written policies. (U1)
Forming written policies is an action this organization took to retain control in a close environment involving vulnerable children and volunteers. Common sense would normally prevail in such a circumstance, and contain the visiting volunteer’s desire to distribute unsustainable allowances, but given the loosely arranged nature of most volunteer tourism, and the often minimal resources an NGO has to invest in educating the volunteer, missteps of this nature are not uncommon.

Equity theory means that in response to unjust situations, the party that feels let down will work to adjust the situation, or choose to make changes. Given that the quoted participant began this NGO without intending to host volunteers, it is reasonable to suggest that he would reduce these interactions, if the exchange became consistently unworkable. However, alluding to the complexity around such a decision, this participant reflected:

When you send a volunteer to the Minister of Policy Makers, from the West, they are going to have things done faster than when you are actually there yourself. That is not good in a way, but things get done actually. It kills me to know, one day I had tried to meet the Minister for the last month and I couldn’t, but one day with a volunteer we went to the Minister and that very day we saw him. So that, it kills in a way, but it gives in a way an opportunity. (U1)

So while this ‘kills in a way’, the participant operates within the injustice. While recognition of this does little to restore equity, the voluntourist is at least more useful than the mass tourist, on several levels. It is also true that this imbalance is not always consistent. In the following example, another Ugandan participant reveals her role as a holder of knowledge that the visitor needs:

I’ve learned many people need protection. When a volunteer comes they need to be protected from the local community, not that they are crazy, the local community is not aggressive, but because you are muzungu they think you have a lot of money. They forget that some are students, volunteers, they are not working, they don’t have money in their pockets, they are not big time tourists. So they need protection, you give them that voice. (U2)
In this instance the local gives the tourist ‘voice’, and thus the local holds crucial insider knowledge. In fact, “where the language is unfamiliar, the rules are new, and the culture is different, volunteers are often reduced to feeling childish” (Collins, DeZerega, & Heckscher, 2002, p. 118).

Through the lens of equity theory, it is possible to argue that, relative to other forms of tourism, there is opportunity for communities in volunteer tourism because hosts have marginally more control, as projects are typically managed by them whether or not foreign tour companies have arranged the placement. McGehee and Andereck (2009) contend that volunteer tourism is especially sustainable because it can, when implemented well, preserve the dignity of locals, contribute to NGOs in the community, and use informal tourism that feeds into the local economy. What remains the challenge is when NGOs are funnelled volunteer tourists from Northern-based tour companies and excluded from managing the process (or reaping the monetary benefits). Thus, volunteer tourism’s value depends on grassroots Southern-based NGOs gaining control over this niche and ensuring that the larger tourism industry does not take advantage of receiving communities.

**The Active Other**

In contrast to equity theory, much of the literature on alternative tourism has neglected to grant agency to host communities, preferring to emphasize the neo-colonial impacts of the Western tourism agenda, and in terms of volunteer tourism, focusing on the supposed hypocrisy of the self-seeking yet altruistic volunteer. Overall, Northern readings of tourism tend to proceed based on the presupposition of Southern vulnerability. Wearing et al. (2010) discuss how “the tourist culture assumes the form of a powerful hegemony which submerges, ingests and eventually eclipses the Other culture of the host nation” (p. 57). While I believe voluntourists are unlikely to ‘ingest’ any host culture, in any lasting sense, the formidable force of Western media does have an impact on shaping volunteers’ expectations heading into a placement. Nonetheless, while the host nation may face significant challenges in managing visitors with vastly different customs, this ‘ingesting’ and ‘eclipsing’ of the host culture is a clumsy reading of local agency, volunteer tourism, and often the volunteers themselves.
Critics of tourism are inclined to undercut local capacity to resist, reinterpret, and reproduce tourism encounters to benefit locals as they see fit. A common view is that “tourism turns culture into a commodity, packaged and sold to tourists, resulting in a loss of authenticity” (Cole, 2007, p. 945). Although, there is evidence that “a better understanding is needed of how cultural tourism is used by marginalized groups to gain power and how they can use the identity and pride that commodifying their cultural identity appears to bring” (Cole, 2007, p. 956). In fact, “the interface between cultural commodification and ownership may be crucial to marginalized people gaining or maintaining control of tourism in their midst” (Cole, 2007, p. 956). Thus, cultural commodification is a complicated process that will be interpreted differently by outsiders than it will from within.

Lyons and Wearing (2008) suggest that researchers must “steer away from the dichotomous view that power is exercised by dominant players (tourism operators) over oppressed actors (destination communities) and instead adopt an alternative analytical framework that suggests emancipation is imminent in daily power struggles” (p. 10). Instead, tourism involves “an ongoing and never-ending process of identification, rather than a cause of decline in a pre-existing local identity” (Desforges, 2000, p. 928). It follows that new local and foreign identities are constructed through the tourism encounter.

Arguing that the role of the active ‘Other’ has been underestimated in the scholarship is not to suggest that post-colonial contexts are not compromised by historically inequitable relationships and profound poverty, which in various ways restrict people’s range of action. Instead, it is to witness that people are not acted upon complacently, and that daily interactions continue to shape local attitudes towards tourism, in a contingent and unfolding way. Salazar (2004) notes “there is a need to recognize cultural forms and differences not as continuity with prior traditions, but as novel forms which arise through and are the very product of global socio-cultural flows such as tourism” (p. 87). Out of these global socio-cultural flows, Wearing et al. (2010) claim “the formation of hybrid cultures, then, becomes a precondition for inventive representation in creating subjectivities which resist cultural constraints and cultural determinism” (p. 60). This can apply to both the host and the volunteer, neither of which will
invariably mimic and embody global power relations. However since we do not all encounter globalization on equal terms, free to pick and choose which elements we employ to reinvent our subjectivities, it is worth noting that cultural hybridization is best when done by choice. In the case of vulnerable children, which volunteers regularly work with, agency and choice are less clear.

Baaz (2005), in her study on partnerships in development work, discovered something contrary to the Western media’s often recycled stereotype of the passive starving African. She explains, “one program officer ventured an oppositional reading of cultural exchange, by asserting that the sending of development workers can be seen as empowering and as a way to resist the idea of the superiority of the mzungu” (Baaz, 2005, p. 70). The reason being that “an important lesson learned from working with white development experts is that the racist stereotypic image of whites as efficient, honest, competent professionals often collapses” (Baaz, 2005 p. 70). Thus, “just as the development encounter sometimes seems to imply the stereotypical images of Africans are strengthened rather than challenged, so stereotypes of Europeans risk being strengthened” (Baaz, 2005 p. 70). This reversal of stereotyping is an unintended outcome of international development blunders, and must be all the more common in situations with largely untrained voluntourists. The above example effectively cuts across notions of Southern passivity. This section has argued that Southern-based NGOs are not ‘ingested’ or ‘eclipsed’ by Northerners travelling in their midst, even when insensitive cultural mishaps take place. To project this impressionable image is a continuation of how the West has historically chosen to speak about the Rest.

**The Voluntourist**

*First they went climbing in Kathmandu. Then they stumbled into a local school and taught English to baffled Nepalese. Fifty spliffs and a thousand emails later, they returned home with a Hindu charm and tie-dye trousers. They had lots of great stories but the world remained thoroughly unsaved. (Barkham, 2006)*

Research has revealed that volunteer tourists’ motives typically range between wanting to travel, seeking an adventure, making friends, gaining career experiences, developing oneself, helping people, and
meeting the challenge (Brown, 2005; McIntosh & Zahra, 2007b; Sin, 2009). Specifically, the appeal of volunteer tourism involves the “desire to travel with a purpose, spend time assisting in saving natural environments, working with communities in developing countries as well as fulfilling higher level needs such as self-actualization, enhancement of self-image, feelings of accomplishment, social interaction and belongingness” (Gilmour & Saunders as cited in Coghlan, 2007, p. 268). Discernibly, for young volunteers “having grown up in a climate of increasing freedom of choice, their search for volunteering opportunities resembles consumerism” (Soderman & Snead, 2008, p. 119). Selecting a placement is in itself identity-making, as they mark themselves out as daring, adventurous, caring, and brave. At the same time, “the notion that volunteer tourism can be used to perform the ‘self’ however, is also closely related to criticisms levelled at volunteer tourists as they are thought to be seeking opportunities for the sake of resume building or to appear ‘cool’ or ‘adventurous’ to friends” (Sin, 2009, p. 493). This may be true, but likely in conjunction with the reading that voluntourists are a “sociocultural group or movement representing an ethical body of people correcting or at least ameliorating the historical exploitation and environmental mistakes on which their society has been built” (Pearce & Coghlan, 2008, p. 132).

Volunteering has been recognized as giving meaning to life, and can feed a person’s need for connection by directing one’s energy towards a clear cause. Westerners can be viewed as increasingly alienated from any strong sense of community, removed from nature, and at a loss for identity in a sea of incessant modernization. Robinson (1999) writes, “indeed, it is the search for glimpses of closeness between nature and culture which is at the root of expansion of alternative, eco and ethnic tourism; what we no longer have, or think we don’t have, we seek elsewhere” (p. 381). The voluntourist can also be understood by recognizing that Western societies often function under a mantra whereby “all time should be productive” (Ingram, 2008, p. 23). This notion of constant productivity is well endowed by a venture that includes self-improvement, gaining skills, seeing the world, and saving poor people.

Heron’s exploration of Canadian development workers in Africa has relevance to this discussion. Heron (2007) explains, “regardless of how we may frame the altruism of our choice to go overseas in our
own thinking, this decision is predicated on the presumption that our presence will somehow help to redeem a desperate situation” (p. 43). Implicitly this framing presumes that Northerners are “obligated to act and ‘they’ await our interventions. The epistemic violence inhering in such moves escapes our notice as the North’s superiority is affirmed in this discourse and the Other is rendered devoid of heterogeneity, agency, and thereby subjectivity” (Heron, 2007, p. 44). Heron (2007) contends that “our desire for development, while a manifestation of the helping imperative, can be more accurately understood as a profound desire for self” (p. 156). Ultimately, and contrary to the intent of most volunteer tourists, “this quest for self is, of course, equally an actualization of class privilege” (Heron, 2007, p. 51). She states:

This discourse normalizes our centering of ourselves in relation to other people’s needs, not by recognizing how we are implicated in global economic processes of globalization that underlie these needs, but by erasing the agency of local peoples who are Othered in these processes, and by presenting “our” (read white middle-class Northern) knowledge, values, and ways of doing things as at once preferable and right, since the North, especially Canada, appears orderly, clean, and well managed in comparison. (Heron, 2007, p. 3)

Heron (2007) does not conclude that international development work is inherently defective, but that narratives of innocence need to be fervently analyzed.

**Tourism as a Tool for Development**

*Before you’ve finished your breakfast in the morning, you’ll have relied on half the world (King, 1967).*

**Development**

This section will first discuss development in general and then specifically as it pertains to tourism. Development enters into this discussion because volunteer tourism skirts at the edge of, and encounters similar critiques to, the development industry. While those working in development may balk at the crossover, and clearly demarcate what they are doing as distinct, they are correct in so far as volunteer tourism is a form of ‘serious leisure’. However, they are less correct in that receiving communities will not invariably make such distinctions (Nelson, 2010), and depending on the context, a
development worker and a volunteer tourist may be engaged in similar activities. Thus, I turn to
development because it provides a contextual backdrop for what volunteer tourists step into. Regardless
of our personal perspective, McEwan (2009) notes how development is a term of near mystical
proportions, one that promises a miracle cure for complex problems with complex histories.

Broadly speaking, development is “a set of ideas and a system of institutions and technologies,
with a vast range of specialised agencies operating in its arenas, including bilateral and multilateral
donors, governments and NGOs” (Lewis, 2006, p. 2). The historical trajectory of development comes,
somewhat uncomfortably, directly after colonialism. McEwan (2009) explains how many individuals
“involved in development since the 1950s have been honourable and well meaning... However, the
claim to expertise to diagnose problems and devise interventions is a claim to power and a continuity
from the colonial period into the present” (p. 110). In the aftermath of colonialism, however, “the
developed/underdeveloped dichotomy opened up a new development relationship, moving it away from
an exploitative colonialism towards cooperation between global agencies to assist those in need”
(Ingram, 2008, p. 35). This transition took place following World War II, and “moved theory of social
evolution away from one that was race based to one based on the economic conditions of a society”
(Ingram, 2008, p. 35). This also marked the start of a period of top-down, large-scale, externally imposed
development projects led by international bodies such as the World Bank, the IMF and various OECD
governments. Decades of wasted resources, failed projects, and disempowered communities later it
became apparent that the Western-imposed development agenda was not going according to plan. The
poor were still poor, and were actually getting poorer: “More people live in poverty today than at any
time in human history, with more than 60 percent of the world’s population earning less than U.S $3 per
day” (Chossudovsky as cited in Gladstone, 2005, p. 132). In reaction, “some development specialists
suggest that development has not only failed in its undertakings but it is inherently flawed and has
actually perpetuated poverty in many instances” (Broad & Spenser, 2008, p. 218). The central issue that
ultimately emerged is that development was being imposed from external funders who lacked crucial knowledge about the local contexts in which they sought to develop.

Ingram (2008) tells us “theories of development have travelled a long way to arrive at today’s position of recognizing the importance of working alongside people to identify the root causes to problems and possible solutions” (p. 34). Local ownership, capacity building and sustainability are now central themes in most development projects. The paradigmatic shift in development theory to one of partnership and participation “requires NGOs to analyse and reflect on their role and actions” (Ingram, 2008, p. 45), and thus constant criticism has created a self-conscious climate. Pieterse (2001) writes:

At a time when there is a widespread admission that several development decades have brought many failures, while the development industry continues unabated, there is continuous and heightened self criticism in development circles, a constant search for alternatives, a tendency towards self-correction and a persistent pattern of cooptation of whatever attractive or fashionable alternatives present themselves. (p. 79)

This searching for alternatives within development circles is in recognition of the failures that have occurred, in growing appreciation of indigenous knowledge, and in an enhanced awareness of the sheer complexity of development problems. Thus, in volunteer tourism, “the assumption that unskilled and enthusiastic people can ‘do development’ ignores much recent thinking about development, harking back to paradigms long since discarded (in theory at least)” (Trewby, 2007, p. 36).

Some claim that we have not travelled all that far since the colonial era, and that, “the former colonies remain implicitly presented as places for Northern ‘heroes’” (Heron, 2007, p. 36). This is crucial for volunteer tourists to grasp, because as Heron (2007) notes “historicized imperial relations shape the world and our subjectivities, so that if we do not understand how we are implicated in the perpetuation of global domination, we are bound to help reproduce it” (p. 22). It is also necessary for Westerners to realize that the wealth of the ‘developed’ countries rests on resources extracted from poor countries
It follows that “it is a fraud to hold up the image of the world’s rich as a condition available to all” (Lummis, 1992, p. 47), and significant steps towards actual sustainability are needed.

Beyond the critiques that are now regularly levelled at the large-scale development industry, we still need development, given the vast scale of poverty today (McEwan, 2009). For instance:

It is estimated that 830 million people are undernourished, 1,100 million lack access to safe water, 2,600 million lack access to basic sanitation, 1,000 million lack adequate shelter, 1,600 million lack access to electricity, 2,000 million lack access to essential drugs, 774 million adults are illiterate and there are 218 million child labourers. (Pogge, 2008, p. 2)

These are hardly figures to be avoided due to apathetic detachment, and voluntourists are responding to an impulse to do something about this. Despite the astronomical scale of poverty, “just 1 per cent of the national incomes of countries in the North would suffice to end severe poverty worldwide” (McEwan, 2009, p. 315). Meanwhile in media and popular opinion, “any responsibility for the creation of poverty within global capitalism is effaced by positing imperialism as a solution and positioning the West as the benevolent hand that will lift the impoverished out of their natural state of degeneracy” (McEwan, 2009, p. 149). In other words, a simple revolutionary approach of sharing national wealth to remedy worldwide poverty is surrendered to more favourable forms of intervention/recreation.

In *The White Man's Burden*, Easterly (2006) divides the external development planners from those searching for solutions from within. He explains, “most of the recent success in the world economy is happening in Eastern and Southern Asia, not as a result of some global plan to end poverty but for homegrown reasons” (Easterly, 2006, p. 304). He holds that this is because those who know the problems will be best able to resolve them (Easterly 2006). Easterly (2006) lists recently successful economies, including India, as a testament to how, regardless of the West’s failed attempts, “the great bulk of development success in the Rest comes from self-reliant, exploratory efforts, and the borrowing of ideas, institutions, and technology from the West when it suits the Rest to do so” (p. 318). With so much popular awareness of development aid, it may even strike some as a natural process, not needing
to be questioned. While aid itself is less the issue than how that aid is delivered, questioning the reasons why aid is needed in the first place is crucial to revealing the underlying causes. Easterly (2006) writes,

> When you are in a hole, the top priority is to stop digging. Discard your patronizing confidence that you know how to solve other people’s problems better than they do. Don’t try to fix governments or societies. Don’t invade other countries, or send arms to one of the brutal armies in a civil war. End conditionality. Stop wasting our time with summits and frameworks. Give up on sweeping and naive institutional reform schemes. The aim should be to make individuals better off, not to transform governments or societies. (p. 322)

Easterly (2006) does recognize that official aid agencies and national governments still have a place as vehicles for development, because all that really matters is “what works to get help to the poor” (p. 324). This is a reminder that while the development industry has been charged with not listening to the subaltern, postcolonial theory risks forgetting “whether the subaltern is eating” (Sylvester, 1999, p. 703). Further, the tourism industry could add that what it offers at least grants subalterns a seat at the table.

**Tourism**

Enloe (1989) claims, “Tourism... is about power, increasingly internationalized power. That tourism is not discussed as seriously by conventional political commentators as oil or weaponry may tell us more about the ideological constructions of ‘seriousness’ than about the politics of tourism” (p. 40). In recent decades, many governments of less economically developed countries have embarked on tourism, either on their own initiative or as directed by international agencies such as the World Bank. Tourism can respond to several key development needs by providing increased foreign capital, international partnerships, and improved infrastructure. Tourism also offers an “attractive alternative to other forms of economic development because of its potential for growth, employment generation, protection of natural and cultural assets and support for activities and facilities which make local areas more interesting and rewarding places to live” (Wearing, 2001, p. 162). According to the UNWTO, “properly managed, with sustainability and inclusion at its core, tourism can become the world
development industry – particularly in the poorest countries” (UNWTO as cited in Higgins-Desbiolles, 2008, p. 352), and notably, “tourism is included in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) of more than 80% of low income countries” (Meyer, 2010, p. 164). Mowforth and Munt (2003) explain:

Tourism has come to represent a considerable attraction to many Third World governments. It has been widely promoted both within the Third World and by First World ‘experts’ as a means of economic diversification and an important mechanism in producing foreign exchange. There can be little surprise that in Third World countries characterised by indebtedness and by primary industries (such as agriculture and mining) adversely affected by world market prices, tourism has come to represent something of a panacea. (p. 252)

While some see tourism as a panacea, this view has abated somewhat as traditional tourism fails to deliver on its promise, often proving itself unsustainable and exploitative in practice. In light of this, sustainable tourism and specifically community-based tourism have more recently been viewed as a way forward, in a sense integrating lessons learned from the development industry more generally. What is evident is that community-based tourism feeds directly into a country’s economy and has tangible benefits for locals. When I asked one participant how the local community was impacted, he replied:

Most of the volunteers have made a huge impression on the children and on the charity. Also it’s beneficial for the economy, all the volunteers pay their own way, buy their own food, rent their own apartment. So I think it’s very good for India to have this income coming in. Then they help a broad range, the hotel owners, the guest house owners, the food merchants, the shops, down to helping slum children, so I think it’s very beneficial for the country. (I1)

Usually the volunteer tourist does fuel the local economy, although this comment came from an NGO that is not connected to a sending agency. Alternately, projects that are involved with a sending agency risk repeating the problem that plagues mass tourism – that of leakage. Thus, in harnessing the potential of volunteer tourism, the key question becomes control, with the outcome depending on whether a tourism enterprise feeds back into the community, or whether revenue never really leaves the North.
In discussing how tourism as a conduit of power, is often linked to imperialism and colonialism, Mowforth and Munt (2003) note “a good deal of the critique arises from observations of the mainstream mass tourism industry. It is somewhat blunt or crude in dealing with new forms of tourism whose claim is to escape these very relationships of domination” (p. 52-3). I add that what the charge of imperialism and colonialism also miss, in terms of volunteer tourism, is the unique role of Southern-based NGOs. Unlike deluxe hotels owned by foreign corporations, NGOs are on the receiving end of these tourists. NGOs operate in the “absence of a profit motive” (Kennedy & Dornan, 2009, p. 198), and so hosting volunteers is about more than the income they can bring. NGOs prioritize “development approaches that are inclusive of indigenous and/or host communities, maximise the ‘quality’ of interaction of tourism with host communities, and involve ethics of care for nature” (Wearing, et al., 2005, p. 426). While working in the ‘absence of a profit motive’, NGOs still need to operate. As such, NGOs have been quick to respond to the volunteer tourism trend. For example, one NGO in this study has volunteers booked a year and a half in advance (without using a sending agency). As more grassroots organizations get involved, this will impact a given economy in ways patently different than mass tourism. The remainder of this paper turns to this study’s findings.

**Country Contexts**

This section briefly introduces the contexts in which the interviews took place. While it is not possible here to fully treat the Indian or Ugandan NGO contexts involved, some of this detail will be expressed by the respondents themselves. While I recognize that each NGO varied in how rooted it is in relation to the community in which it works, and that no NGO is entirely representative of any community, I still sought access to community views through the perspectives of these participants. All participants are volunteer coordinators, founders, or directors of the NGOs visited. Interviews in India took place mostly in Goa, while interviews in Uganda happened in and around Kampala.

**India**
Often difficult for Westerners to grasp, India’s modernity “is less a story of a linear progression from a traditional society to a modern one, but rather a complex entanglement of modernity and tradition” (McEwan, 2009, p. 106). Following independence, as the Indian government employed Western development discourse this fermented “not simply as a material relation of social and economic position, but also as a state of mind, a form of identity and a notion of citizenship” (McEwan, 2009, p. 131). Two participants reflected this by spontaneously quoting their former Prime Minister’s thoughts on development during an interview. For many foreign tourists, India is a place “where people are expected to search for themselves or something authentic which cannot be found from the west” (Mustonen, 2005, p. 167). However, Goa, perhaps best known for its reputation as a rave destination, boasts tourism of every category, including high-end enclave-like hotels. Goa is unique in many ways, but foremost in being India’s richest state, and for its history as a Portuguese colony. Thus, Goa is an interesting destination for volunteer tourists to choose, as the alternative tourist is surrounded by the mass tourist, in full fervour. Goans are proud of their heritage, and spoke of themselves as Goan first and Indian second. Alternately, Ugandans did not appear to do this, despite distinct tribal groups. Rather, Ugandan respondents spoke of their nation, Uganda, which could reflect a desire to transcend clan distinctions.

Uganda

Where India as a travel destination is typically shrouded in exotic allure, Western media brings Africa to our television screens soaked in “starvation, disaster and war” (McEwan, 2009, p. 138). Uganda, in particular, is commonly more familiar to the West through the atrocities of Idi Amin, than as a potential tourist destination. Those who do visit Uganda will enter a nation with a much different sense of itself on the global stage than India, as well as a varied stake in what tourism means. Uganda has been comparatively more isolated from international tourism, due to internal conflict and poor infrastructure. Further, Uganda’s experience of colonialism was as a British protectorate, not a colony per se, and thus the British interest in Uganda was centered on resources, which they gained through indirect rule (Lepp, 2007). Lepp (2008) notes how, “Uganda’s experience as a protectorate also explains why so many
residents decided that tourism was a bazungu plot to steal village land and resources” (p. 18). Following Amin’s annihilation of tourism during his tyrannical dictatorship, tourism was revived in the 1980s, as President Museveni embarked on a tourism agenda featuring national wildlife parks. Currently, “tourism is a development strategy, yet it is a complex one involving international tourists, the construction of national identity and foreign investment” (Lepp & Harris, 2008, p. 532). Lepp and Harris (2008) quote one tourism official noting, “the more tourists that we bring in here... the more we will change the perception around the globe about what Uganda is... [Tourism is a] way to define ourselves” (p. 534).

**Research Findings: Talking with the Volunteer Coordinators**

I began my interviews by asking respondents to tell me what they perceived was the primary value of hosting volunteer tourists. In Goa, one participant replied that the benefits of volunteer tourism are mutual, and that overall the exchange “is very, very, rewarding” (I2). Similarly, in Kampala, one respondent called the exchange mutual, asserting it empowered the women that this organization works with and helped to build inspiring relationships (U2). Speaking specifically to the value volunteers brought, another Ugandan respondent explained that the volunteers come “with energies and power them into the children – maybe it is love – and then it boosts the organization” (U1). These comments reflect a common thread that recognized the spirit of volunteerism as inspirational for the communities they worked with, and noted the added enthusiasm the volunteers brought. In one form or another, respondents from all NGOs reported that the volunteers provided new and exciting perspectives, fresh commitment, funding support, and opportunities for material resources.

I asked participants what they perceived the women, children and marginalized communities they worked with learned from being exposed to the volunteers. In Goa, one participant referred to the creativity that develops in the children as an outcome of contact with the volunteers. He explained they learn “the freedom to speak, to choose, to have their own creativity develop, which can be suppressed at times in our culture, in our settings.... So the mindset basically changes” (I2). Encountering the individualism of the volunteers appeared to change the way the children viewed their own abilities. This
participant spoke of the traditionally structured life path in India, in comparison to the volunteers who exist outside of this structure, and reported that this exposure inspired the children.

I also asked the participants to discuss their experiences as intercultural facilitators, including what they found challenging or rewarding. In India this was explained as an ongoing learning process, where for example, Asian ways of being oral in contrast to Western ways of being literal was referred to as “a place where we are trying to improve every time” (I2). At another Indian NGO, two respondents discussed their relationships with the volunteers very warmly. They exclaimed, “sometimes we forget, we are mingling constantly with them, so we are sort of one with them at times. We have learned so many things, but we have some things, as we are Goans, so we come from this background” (I3). This Goan identity being referenced is constructed, in part, around the experience of Portuguese colonization, contact with international tourism, and a living standard three times that of elsewhere in India.

In Uganda the learning process associated with being a volunteer coordinator was discussed with pleasure. One respondent remarked, “I’ve learned to appreciate both cultures. All cultures are rich, and very good, you just need to understand them.... I’ve had a chance to work with the most volunteers and they’re good. They’re very good. We love the volunteers” (U2). Another Ugandan respondent also recognized how central learning was to the exchange, noting that prior to networking with volunteers he thought “maybe we are alone in the world, we are only Ugandans” (U3). Interacting with other cultures had helped him learn a few languages, and he was very satisfied with this. Working with the volunteers had meant he could visit different places in Uganda, and he explained “being in another career I wouldn’t get that access, learning different local and international languages, and I have loved it” (U3).

In pursuing an understanding of the broader impact, I asked what the community members not directly involved in the NGOs might feel about seeing the volunteers around and what kinds of impressions locals held. One respondent smiled and replied, “when foreigners come Indians get very attracted, anyway, because of skin color and all that” (I2). This was echoed at another Indian organization where it was mentioned that “in India, white skin is something to be treated with reverence,
so you go with the flow with whatever that person is asking, and it’s exotic and exciting” (I4). When I spoke to one director who regularly brought volunteers into slum areas he replied:

I think in the slums they’re fine with it. I don’t know if locally anyone pays that much attention. Goa is a bit different... Have to say, the children love all the diversity of the volunteers, and I don’t think they get overly connected or anything like that where it’s painful for them. (I1)

These varied comments on the degree of attention paid to volunteers may reflect ‘Indian’ and ‘Goan’ cultures respectively. This again alludes to the distinct relationship that Goa has with tourists, not only from the rest of India, but from Uganda. For instance, in Uganda there is little chance that a white person could enter a slum area and not be paid attention to. One Ugandan director explained that when he takes volunteers into the slums, some onlookers will observe the volunteers and remark “oh these people are taking pictures of these poor children to make money off them” (U1), and address the director, saying “you are welcome, but we don’t want these white people exploiting us” (U1). This is a qualitatively different kind of reaction than the one in which white people are “treated with reverence”, noted in India, and is suggestive of both a distinct relationship to skin color, and a separate encounter with colonialism. To summarize, the British left a few things in India which Indians still find useful, such as trains and cricket, whereas colonialism in Uganda only ever sought to extract and exploit.

I asked what the participants viewed as the basic difference between volunteer tourists and regular tourists. In Goa, the regular tourist was described as not realizing much about the situations within the community, and simply passing it by (I1). This was qualified by noting that the volunteers still like to have a good time and go out at night, but that their difference rests in being “more aware of customs and things like that, whereas tourists come to visit, and they don’t wear T-shirts and whatnot” (I1). A participant from an organization near Kampala also noted this greater level of awareness in volunteer tourists, pointing to the volunteers’ ability to make real friends. He noted that regular tourists move around from site to site in their high-end safari vehicles. Regular tourists were viewed as not able to understand ‘the real Uganda’ because they do not eat the local food, they stay in their hotels, and they
do not get a clear picture of the country. The volunteers, in contrast, “get to see the real situation that these people are in and they get involved in community-based projects” (U3). He continued, “because the safari tourist does not get access to the local people, the local people do not really care about them, they just say ‘oh maybe they are looking for something’, whereas when they see the volunteers they say ‘oh they have come here to be part of this’” (U3). Thus, local responses in this study reveal a solid differentiation between luxury tourists and volunteer tourists.

I asked respondents to tell me about the kinds of presumptions and impressions the volunteers arrived with. These were regarded as very much case by case, depending on whether the volunteer had left home before, whether they had been sensitized to what they were stepping into, how flexible they were, and how old they were. A respondent from an Indian NGO had found that “most people who decide to volunteer have a certain set of sensibilities as to what they’re getting into” (I4). One would suspect this to be true, although another respondent laughingly recounted managing volunteers who obsessively apply hand sanitizer, and decry “the slum is dirty!” (I1) Concerning presumptions, the Ugandan respondents all seemed aware of the stereotypes Western media perpetuates of Africa. One respondent noted, “they think maybe that Africans are primitive, they don’t think that we know some things but when they come here, they can find that even in Africa or Uganda there are some people with this knowledge” (U3). In both countries, volunteers’ ability to adapt was often regarded as good, with one respondent assuring me “they learn very quickly” (U4).

I delved further, asking participants to elaborate on what kinds of motivations and expectations the volunteers seemed to exhibit. One respondent explained:

Yes many of the volunteers do have that in mind – in four weeks I’m going to go to India and see a change that is very noticeable. During our orientation we will tell them that even if they don’t see change over the four weeks, but still their efforts are not on waste. We believe the development of a child is like brick by brick, and whatever little impact that the volunteer has done is like a brick in the child’s life, not to feel anybody out of place. Some might see change
that happens during that time, or might see a gradual change. Sometimes they’ll see the child bloom, like a flower, like a rose, but it will have been started by another volunteer. It’s a slow process, you sow a seed now, someone else will get the results – it’s not you who gets it. We tell the volunteer this so they won’t be disappointed that they would not see the bloom. Because it is a human resource that you change, it’s not a human machine that you put in and get the product out. It is development, and it is a slow process. (I3)

This participant is referring to the volunteers as ‘doing development’, albeit as part of a broader program of education that these children are receiving. Here, development is recognized as the goal, while the volunteers’ role in attaining that development is but one brick in a larger process of building. Addressing volunteers’ expectations, another participant in India explained:

Something that I always, always say to all volunteers, whether I’m working with them or not, is that you’ll always, always, always take away more then you can ever give, always, and if you reconcile yourself to that fact you’ll have a much richer experience. And that’s not to say that you can’t give something back, I very much think, but I also think that the most valuable things that are exchanged in volunteering is cultural understanding more than it is servicing a need, or providing a service, feeding the hungry, all those things that people go to volunteer for, which I think is really misguided. So I think... that a big part of their experience is just by very virtue of the fact of being in India, and being in an NGO, and the fact that they want to come to be with an NGO rather than be on the beach is a big plus in the first place, and I guess making sure that they don’t have a save the world attitude when they come, because if they do they’re going to be grossly disappointed. (I4)

This comment came from an expatriate who is now living and working in India. Fully immersed in Indian culture and managing incoming volunteers, this respondent was able to explain the gulf between expectations and reality with clarity through familiarity with both cultures.
From an alternate perspective, the motivations of volunteers arriving to Uganda are described as such:

Motivations? I think the first thing is we are different, basically in color, so others have never been in Africa, we are different in color, they want to meet new people. Others are because Africa is rich with different kinds of tourism attraction, so others come here to see different things. Others come here because they want to help out. Because I think in the Western culture they mainly see the bad things about Africa, the wars, hunger, so they want to experience it, they want to see it first hand, exactly. And I think when they come here others see that things are not as they have been, so they expect to teach but others they end up being taught, so I think many have different reasons. But because we are different, and Africa, many of our countries had war and fighting, so I think they come here to help, but even to change. (U3)

This comment neatly bridges the learning cycle of many international volunteers, from first expecting to be teachers in a place riddled by war and hunger, to finding themselves ‘being taught’. Sensing that the entire experience is moulded by a constructive process involving the interactions between volunteers and locals, I returned to questioning more specifically how the broader community might be impacted by the volunteer’s behaviour, offering the example of photo-taking to gauge whether this was an issue. This was countered with an emphatic response from one Goan respondent asserting how friendly and accommodating the community is, and how “all foreigners coming in are very, very welcome. Very welcomed. In fact, they are happy” (I2). This certainly represents one general camp in Goa. A more middle ground perspective, held by an expatriate director explained:

They actually just call Westerners hippies, and again there’s a big difference between tourists who sunbathe topless and swim shorts and things like that, and the volunteers.... Often what they see are people who come for a holiday, and it is a holiday for them, so they come, eat, drink and sunbathe, and that’s what they come for, but the volunteers they’re more normal. They’re behaving how they would normally, rather than how they would on holiday. (I1)
In this assessment, volunteers are less of an impact on the receiving community than mass tourists because they are ‘behaving how they would normally’. Responding to my inquiry about volunteers’ photo-taking behaviours, another participant in Goa explained that volunteers need to be told:

You are never going to know what is and is not okay, because lots of the time people will cooperate, but they don’t necessarily want to cooperate... even if people are smiling a lot, you don’t know if that’s what they’re wanting. (I4)

In fact, all the Indian NGOs had rules about cameras, requiring volunteers to refrain from picture-taking until they knew the children, or until the last day spent at the project. One respondent affirmed “when you take photos, what do you teach the children? You are more than photographs. You should know how much you give, rather than take from here” (I3).

In Uganda, the issue of photo-taking also arose, as mentioned earlier in the context of exploitation. But a different participant assessed it this way: “The volunteers don’t just believe it, because in some areas they are welcomed like heroes, and so they tend to take a lot of photos, because they don’t believe what they are seeing” (U3). This is a gentler reading of what some view as capturing cultural capital to show off to friends. What was given more attention in Uganda, however, was the issue of dress code, with twice the topic of wearing miniskirts emerging as offensive. One respondent noted, “I think it happens when you have not talked to the volunteer, and you have to know what a volunteer will expect, what they want to achieve during their time working with you. It’s on both sides. You have to talk” (U3).

Still, similar to the Indian exuberance noted earlier, problematic customs were mostly grazed over with assertions like “Uganda loves people, we love visitors, so we welcome them like yours” (U3).

Approaching the interviews with my own impressions of what volunteers sought from volunteer tourism, I wanted to hear what participants believed the volunteers actually learned from the experience. A common response, in both countries, was that the volunteers are struck by so much happiness despite poverty. In India this was described as a life-changing experience, especially in relation to the warmth they encountered from the children (I1, I2). In Uganda it was described as a “the way people live with
each other‖ (U2). Apparently, volunteers commonly exclaimed that the people were so happy, living with so little, and how amazing it was that even with so few possessions, people can be very happy.

I sought to uncover what long term picture these respondents held around hosting volunteers, and what role they envisioned volunteer tourism could play in their country in the future. In India this was joyously met with: “If they can bring a smile on a poor child’s face, why should we stop it? If they can bring growth in the life of an old person, why should it stop? After all, we are all human beings” (I3). The Ugandan response was a little more tempered: “To benefit most from volunteers you need to be more welcoming, more willing to learn from them cause I believe everyone we keep learning, keep learning, learning never ends, there is always a different way that something can be done better” (U2). In looking ahead, a request that volunteers teach local people the spirit of volunteerism was twice noted in Uganda. It was expressed that although Ugandans believe volunteering is for rich people, unemployment could be helped if they themselves took up volunteering and gained skills in the process (U3).

These participants all gave valuable insights into their experiences as volunteer coordinators, and offered what appeared to be genuine feedback about the process. What struck me as missing from these responses, however, was any discussion of neo-colonialism or how equity was being assessed in a fundamentally inequitable exchange. No matter how hosts were managing to make the best of an imperfect global tourism relationship, these interviews showed a general tendency to look towards the bright side, and to exercise their own agency by conceptualising the practice as a mutual exchange. As discussed previously, “the methods used to adapt to inequity appear to be linked to the perceived cost of restoring the inequity with most respondents redefining the situation if that is the easier route” (Greenburg; Miles et al. as cited in Pearce & Coghlan, 2008, p. 137). I now turn to two interviews – one Ugandan, one Indian – that differentiate themselves by being much more critical. First I present the views of a Ugandan director who runs a rehabilitation home for street children, and second I offer a counterpoint example, a Diaspora organization that places non-resident Indians throughout India.
The Ugandan NGO is run by a young man who began by opening a home with the mandate to rehabilitate orphaned and vulnerable children living in slums through music, sports, and education. The organization is small, although in the interim between the interview and this writing it has opened its own community school enabling marginalized children in the area to receive an education. The director agreed to meet with me having had no prior warning of my arrival, as his phone number was passed my way in Uganda. Trusting the connection that had led me to him, he agreed to participate, and spoke openly at length. I began by asking him why he thought volunteers came in the first place. He replied:

Some of them I think feel good when they come to a different country and then go back, I’m going to tell you my opinions and what I’ve heard – does it count? From people like you, I’ve heard from people like you, because sometimes I’m confused and I’m like what is your life like in America? And then someone tells me, some people come here because to them it is cool to be working or helping people in Africa. Then they come and then they chat with friends and say “oh I was in Africa, and helped these people”. So I got that from a friend from the West, from North America telling me about volunteers from North America. (U1)

This notion that some people go to Africa in order to appear “cool” and to return home with stories is documented in the volunteer tourism literature, and discernable in popular culture. What is interesting here is that the respondent sought to understand this perception by talking to a volunteer about it, essentially mapping the mindset of the Westerner. This respondent had clearly analyzed the volunteers at length prior to my asking these questions. He continued:

Some people come because they are teachers, or because they have ability in some area, so they come to the community and try to force what they can offer to the people. When actually, it’s not the people’s problem. Because you are a teacher, you presume these people need an education, when to them education is not the problem, to them their problem is very different. That some of the things that Western people have come to impose, because that’s what they can offer, that’s their expertise. And that project is bound to fail. The same applies, with the
volunteers here, I believe sometimes they are creating a job opportunity for themselves, or to feel better, but not for the reason that I have for why I’m doing what I’m doing, the work I do, understand? I’ve been a street kid myself, I love my country so much, and I believe the answers are in the next generation, that is why I’m doing what I’m doing. That’s why I’m doing what I’m doing. Whereas someone else might have seen it as an opportunity to raise money in America, because he knows what Americans can help, what Americans want, and they can say “help me to help these people”. And I said, I told one volunteer that, before you came, we started with no expectations of volunteers or Western money. We are here and we shall still be. (U1)

This demonstrates both the self-centered motives some volunteers arrive with, and is suggestive of what is missed when studies only focus on the volunteers.

As this participant’s stories unfolded, I became increasingly perplexed at why this organization was still taking volunteers at all. For example, he revealed the tensions around both the racial identity of the volunteers and the economic disparity between the children and the volunteers.

The children, people here, and including some people my age, are convinced, most of the people think that the people from the West have the answers, and everything from the West is good. And that whatever, they try to copy and be like whites. So for instance, when they say something, these children are going to just copy. If they do anything, they’re going to just copy. When actually not everything that you do is permissible here, is acceptable, and I think we are responsible to raise these kids up in this context, because they are going to be here. But you’re going to see that a volunteer will come and love someone and not the rest, you know because this one it talks so much, and then they get an iPod. No here, you cannot give a child an iPod, a 10 year old. Maybe to you its good, but to us it’s out of this world. It is going to create a problem that you are going to leave with our struggle. And when you do that, they have a right because it’s their thing to give it to whoever they want, but we also have a responsibility to say that these children get what they need not what they want, and not develop a culture of asking. (U1)
Creating a culture of asking is an ironic outcome in a form of tourism that seeks to mark itself out as de-commodified. It also shows what can happen when an organization allows unscreened, unskilled, and untrained volunteers to waltz into sensitive environments. While some might read this as vulnerability, it rather speaks to a struggle against materialist culture within the context of an urban youth program, whereby teaching the children to resist wanting what they do not have is an act of strength, a cultivation of character, and a perpetual fight. From this director’s perspective, monitoring the children’s propensity towards developing a culture of asking (and wanting), is within his realm of action and responsibility.

The respondent’s story thus speaks to what Lyons and Wearing (2008) invoke when they remark that emancipation is located in the working out of “daily power struggles” (p. 10).

In combination with the story discussed earlier about volunteers distributing allowances to these same children, I wanted to know more about how the volunteers initially adjusted to try to understand what was going so wrong. He explained:

Some of the problems are due to the people themselves, because we lift them so high. Don’t be surprised to see that if you go to see the Minister you can in one day, but I can take months before seeing the Minister. You understand? So you also put them, you act like, like you’re special. So you come and everyone sits in front of them, and they sing for you, and do everything special for you. It’s not bad to welcome visitors, in our culture we do that. But it has to stop at a certain extent, it has to stop somewhere. So I think, by and large, that there’s a problem with adjusting to the cultures here, if people come from the West. (U1)

This speaks to the fact that appearances can be misleading, and that it is important to recognize that hosts might default to a position of treating the volunteer tourist like a Northern saviour, as a legacy of their own conditioning. This is also suggestive that part of the responsibility rests on the hosts to decolonize themselves. This participant continued explaining his perspective on the adjustment process, which led us towards the issue of volunteers taking ownership over projects:
Most of them, at least the ones I’ve seen, really think, they don’t realize the differences in culture. And this is extreme sometimes, depending I think, on how you guys are raised, it is hard to kind of submit. So I guess that is the reason why some of them will come and say, I’m not working with you, I’m going to start an organization on my own where I can do things my way. Because what you think is good might not be good, with them. So they choose not to comply, and after all they have the resources, and they get started. And that is so killing to me, I really hate it, because I’ve seen it when someone spoils children here and then they go back to America, she is back in America, she says I’m not coming back to Uganda. And then she’s leaving these kids with us when actually we are fighting over the same things where they shouldn’t be Americanized, they are Africans, you know, so I guess they want to come here and Westernize and it has a very big impact. It is so killing to me. (U1)

Coming from North America, where starting up an organization in Africa is mostly perceived as benevolent, I asked him to explain why this was so problematic. He replied:

For some of the people who come from the West, come to Uganda and then stay here for one year or two years, and then they pretend to know everything. This is how people behave in Africa, and generalize, and not even generalize, they think now they have become Ugandan. Like some, I’m here for 30 years, and they come for three, and maybe they’re experts, and those are the kind of people who end up starting projects because they think they know. They think they’re experts. I’ve seen them, they come and bring teams, and then they say this is how things are done. And so what that in the end creates in them, is they think they can do everything. Me, I think the people doing the work on the ground should be supported. Like you have something I don’t have, we are connected because we are doing the same piece of work. I think it creates really a big problem, because number one, instead of supporting this organization that you came to work with initially, you’re now starting something fresh that is doing the same thing, because you have copied from here, you get the same concepts and start something new. When actually
we have this rooted organization to do the work, help it establish. Number two, in most cases if you’re working with me, and you start another organizations, it is most likely that the people I’m working with will follow you. And so this, you’re killing this, to start up something. And the other thing, because you have the resources it’s most likely that you will attract even the children that are in this program to go to that program. You will find that there is a wastage of resources in so doing, so I really encourage people to partner with local organizations to serve. (U1)

While taking leadership and starting a new organization may not immediately strike the Westerner as wrong, in this context it was proving problematic. A second Ugandan respondent reiterated this claim by also discussing his experience with volunteers trying to lead his projects, with some simply starting their own organizations (U3). Overall, there appeared to be a fraught NGO environment in Uganda with the issue of fraudulent NGOs arising in three interviews, as well as in daily conversation. It appeared that organizations doing genuine community work were facing public scepticism and the need to continually prove themselves to the community. A different Ugandan participant noted that hosting volunteers had added credibility to his organization (U4). Overall, in contrast to India, a higher prevalence of foreign and local NGOs was apparent in Uganda, which likely amounted to this tension.

While visitors taking ownership over projects can occur, I do not read this to mean that every organization started by a foreigner is bound to have this sapping effect – as some are not duplicating, but supplementing. The main point being expressed was that without living in Uganda year-round, and without really knowing the environment, this was not a beneficial way to contribute. This is a context-specific finding however, and is not here being generalized to the data drawn from India. The NGO climate in India was never discussed in this way during the fieldwork. Further, in India, the one expatriate participant who had founded an organization and the other expatriate participant working for an NGO which has partial foreign roots, both provide services with expertise and care that fill crucial gaps in the contexts in which they emerged. In moving away from generalizations, it is certainly also possible for organizations to run in participatory cross-cultural ways.
Despite that some volunteers in Uganda were attempting to take ownership of local projects, the volunteers were also observed to experience a process of humbling. This contradiction is not surprising when one considers the feelings of helplessness that extreme poverty can evoke and the Western propensity towards individualist problem solving. I asked the Ugandan director to discuss what he perceived volunteer tourists learned from his culture:

What most of them say, they learn to appreciate what they have. We had one girl come here, and this is a fancy house, this is a mansion compared to where we used to live. We used to live in one room, 16-17 people, with our instruments, very dirty, one meal, no clothing, sometimes hungry. And what challenged this girl was, my boys would be laughing and enjoying life. And she cried looking at it, and when I questioned her, and she said “look at them they’re laughing, they’re happy, despite their conditions”. And she explained to me, because I’d never experienced such a thing. She said that “if any of these kids were in Canada, they wouldn’t be laughing because of what you guys don’t have, you don’t have so much, you are missing so much”. She tells me, “in Canada people struggle to get more and more and more things, and even when they don’t have, the children they cry and they refuse to go to school”. Is it true? And they go on strike, or whatnot, because mom hasn’t bought them a car at sixteen. So I guess what they learn is to appreciate. In fact she says she wants to bring her brother to Africa, to see, because she has seen, she’s learned to value what they have. (U1)

This was a theme raised in almost every interview and it would appear that the effect of witnessing people living with less, and doing so with grace, is fundamental to the transformative experience of volunteering overseas. He continued:

I think our culture is humble, so some of them draw from it. They learn to be friendly, they learn to be relational in community. Like I know some person who said “I can’t go back to America, when I’m in America I’m so lonely, I can’t find people. Whereas here when I go in the street, people call me, I’m so happy”. So they learn to, and then she says, she told me she wants to
challenge her friends. And then she told me her friends say Africa has ruined her. Because when she went back she wasn’t putting on fancy clothes. (U1)

While ‘Africa has ruined her’ according to her friends, we also get the sense that Africa has liberated her, and in part this is the goal for many volunteer tourists – to find some kind of reconnection to a less materialistic existence.

While most participants mentioned the eye-opening experience that volunteering offered the Western tourist, no one was as willing to deconstruct the materialist culture rampant in the West to quite this degree. Likewise, no one was willing to admit the negative impacts this can have on children. To learn more about these impacts, I pressed further regarding volunteer's physical behaviours and how these affected the community. He divulged:

Yes, I will note, number one, some of them are dirty. Like, they can come and say I want to meet the Minister, when actually they are very dirty. Not putting on a blouse out of respect, for people of authority. At least for formal functions, I’ve seen some whites in jeans, they don’t care how they dress. Number two, even the words that they speak, for instance this word f-u-c-k, is not acceptable here. But some people speak it comfortably, and they repeat it over and over again, when actually these children are going to imitate that, and they don’t know what they are causing. The other thing I’ve seen many of them in trouble, here in Uganda we very much respect visitors, and visitors get special privileges, and a white is seen as a visitor. But when they go and sometimes they fight in clubs, they over drink and fight, and um, even though, sometimes they have their color speaks and police men may not even question, they get away with it, but it is wrong. Some women even also put on [motions a miniskirt], as they would in America, which is not part of our culture here. So that corrupts even the morals of the youth, because they are seen as models, everything about them is good. So our generation picks up on that, and yeah, basically the speech, they drink and fight, and sometimes they don’t really respect what we respect. (U1)
Here we see a concern around cultural corruption, and although I have raised that such cultural influences do not ‘engulf’ local cultures entirely, these comments do call into question how this can stand up in practice, particularly in relation to vulnerable youth who are susceptible to acculturation. Either way, whether communities in less economically developed countries can withstand the cultural impact of tourists from more economically developed countries is not a question for Westerners to assess, but is most likely continually worked out in situations like this. We can at best surmise that despite clear risks, here a grassroots NGO is hesitant to discontinue accepting volunteers, who bring resources to an under-resourced environment. While the director recognized the risks, and was making actions to protect the organization – written volunteer policies and a tightened selection process – as the founder of an NGO whose very building was funded by a volunteer, we can sense the tension involved.

Hearing what he perceived the volunteers took away from his culture, I asked what he learned from the volunteers, and from his role as an intercultural facilitator. I wanted to know his thoughts about the potential for cultural exchange and dialogue. He responded:

I think I’ve learned to work in tension, because when you have a demand that I have to present to the whole board. The experience I’ve been getting here, let me tell you what I’ve studied, five years of social work. But most people on my Board have not that education. I know cultural relativism, ethnocentrism, someone can be ethnocentric and they don’t know, but because of studying it I know. And I know between two cultures, what might be accepted here will not be accepted there. So the volunteers, we easily connect, because I know what they value, and what we value. But then my other friends on the Board may not know. So it gives me tension, because if she makes a demand to the Board, through me, and they are like no way. I need to be understanding to this person.... For us here, crying is a very big deal. We cry when we’ve lost somebody. The girls especially, the educated now, are used to crying now, but a typical African, you cry when you’ve lost a very close person. But whenever they come, the volunteers they sob, they can cry over everything. And you know me seeing you cry, I feel like oh my, this must be so
serious, and then these people don’t understand. So I work under that kind of pressure, so that’s one thing I’ve learned. I’ve learned to educate, to work out conflict resolutions. There was a time when I had a meeting, and it made someone cry and then she felt she didn’t have power, and then these people we have what you call [speaks in Luganda], when you cry over something that should not make you cry. It is like a curse, you are like inviting death, actually. Like someone to die. So when in meetings someone cries, it’s like what’s wrong with you, it shouldn’t make you cry, you are inviting death, you understand? So I’ve learned to work under that pressure, and to bring out reconciliation, conflict resolution, because at the end of the day I have to talk to people who agree. (U1)

While this may or may not be termed cultural exchange, it does display a profound learning process, while exemplifying the key role of the cultural mediator. This was followed with another story involving a more problematic cultural mediation in which the director eventually refused support from an American funder. In this instance, the funder had chosen to continually undercut the director’s knowledge of the situations of these children, dictate how he should manage his time, and put conditionality on the funds depending on the grades the children received. From across the world the donor made such claims with little comprehension of the kinds of lives these children were escaping, including prostitution, homelessness, and delinquency. As the director recollected the dynamics of the cross-cultural misunderstandings that went on leading up to his final rejection of this funder, the patronizing impact of the donor’s cultural arrogance, and how he functioned within it, was profound.

Despite everything, this participant did recognize benefits accruing from hosting the volunteers, at the same time as he recounted the trials. He explained, “my boys learn many positive things from your culture, like women are as good as men. And that they are challenged by women themselves doing great stuff, so they learn how to treat women with respect” (U1). He also explained how the children learned “that someone loves you” (U1), noting that volunteers tended to express love in a more “tangible” (U1)
way. Both he and another participant also noted how volunteers taught Ugandans how to keep time (U1, U3). Lastly, I asked him what he envisioned volunteer tourism’s role would be in Uganda in the future. When one thinks from outside the box, you get a very good overview. They can advise the people who are running the day-to-day affairs. They can work alongside people as they learn, and also bring their experience. They can promote the projects and organization from their homes to get more resources, if there is an opportunity. They could help teach others about Uganda, or Africa at large, because they’ve been here. And so, in case they want to run, they should seek to partner. For instance, you are very interested in my work, the work that I do in Uganda, I think you could start up the same in your country, and find a way of partnering, then coming to do it here. That’s all. Because I know for sure that at least 80 or 90% of the people who started programs here cannot have a whole year here, they have time here, and then go. They are in and out, so partnership would be the best way to go. Africans should solve African problems. (U1) This response seems to recognize that there is an opportunity for sharing in the exchange, and a chance for relationships to form, but that more respectful partnership is needed.

To close this section on my research findings, I introduce findings from one final receiving organization that stands apart from the previous eight as it ran a Diaspora program in a different region in India, designed for non-resident Indians (NRIs). I was aware of this distinction, but pursued the interview nonetheless, sensing that their perspective on the volunteer tourism phenomenon would prove revealing. Despite that this organization facilitates fellowships for people of Indian descent, making connections to volunteer tourism less direct, it is possible that the length of their programs, the orientation they include, and the kinds of projects they place fellows at is as significant as this being a program for non-resident Indians. I close with this interview partly to offer a counterpoint, and partly because it is the single NGO that demonstrated a solid orientation process for incoming volunteers.

This host organization offers minimum one year fellowships, with a month spent in an intensive orientation (6am-11pm everyday). The fellows receive 10 personal days per year, and are otherwise
committed to working within the marginalized community in which they are placed. They also attend mandatory workshops on Indian development, and other relevant topics. The organization seeks to build principled leadership and empowered visionaries, and it does this through actively pushing its fellows’ boundaries in order to shift mindsets. The organization holds a philosophy of leadership through selfless service based on giving without attachment to results. Importantly, the program emphasizes the long-term impact of the projects and seeks to counter the critiques levelled at international volunteers. Accordingly, fellows are placed ‘where no one else will go’, and appeared to be deeply engaged in community development work to a degree that most volunteer tourists would simply not be exposed to. The director explained how they locate placements that are fulfilling, enriching and challenging:

Because if it’s not challenging then I would say we have created the wrong type of progress. And challenging sometimes means hard work, or emotional, or steep learning curve. Challenging sometimes means pulling your hair out, and when you wake up the next day you have a higher degree of excitement to face the world. (I5)

This sets the tone for the level of intensity that was evident in how this organization operates. Rather than the ‘challenge’ that voluntourism websites promote, this program sought a total transformation in mindset. Coming from the West, the fellows still faced cross-cultural hurdles as they entered tribal Indian villages and slums, yet the program is fundamentally premised on a different kind of commitment to service. Demonstrating this, as soon as we started, the director turned the tables and questioned me:

How many of these projects essentially address real deep felt needs of the communities? How many are just fabricated to accommodate an increasing number of young people who want to feel I am empowered by my education and my background to change your future... and hence I can go back and propel my life to the next management school. And have you earned the food on your plate? We’re a little hardcore. The length is very important. One month is not long enough to have any impact. (I5)
Length of stay was mentioned by most respondents as hindering the impact that volunteers could realistically have, albeit one respondent who connected longer stays to taking ownership. Apart from this exception, it appears the temporary nature of most volunteer tourism is an obvious obstacle.

Grasping his critique, I tried to steer the discussion towards what might be salvaged from the situation. Still, he assessed volunteer tourists as hypocritical.

If you just want to take photos, then go there as a tourist and pump some money into the local economy, that way you are doing more good than under the pretext of volunteer tourism. The lag period of the detrimental impact is probably longer than the short term volunteer effort. It’s lopsided. It’s parasitic in that sense... I would walk away with a lot of learning, exhilarated, walk away with snapshots. What is the community getting out of this? (I5)

Nonetheless, he did offer this advice for how voluntourists might proceed more self-consciously:

...Inculcating a massive degree of sensitivity with clothing, electronic goods, iPods. Not allowing these things to further distance human beings from one another. Communities are going to feel even more distanced. You really come from another world, to bridge that distance requires time and effort and sincerity. It adds layers of difference. This is how and why I am different than you. The best images are the ones you have embedded in your hearts and mind, not as the showboat. The camera is a tool to get people to you, but it’s not connecting them to you, its mechanical, you possess it, they don’t. A camera destabilizes the capacity of an individual to interact. It takes the person out of the equation. The person is not pushed to engage. Be sugar in milk, where your essence is dissolved but your presence is not seen. You add value but you’re not visible. (I5)

This last phrase reminds us that service is about letting one’s essence dissolve to enrich a situation. It is about not seeking recognition for one’s presence, but adding value by letting go. What was intriguing about this interview was that it uprooted the foundation upon which all the others rested.
Critically, this director turned my questions around and asked me what it was that I was seeking to answer – whether volunteer tourism has redeemable value? Up until that point, I had been asking those who were already invested in it. Yet several of the organizations I met with are just as passionately committed to community development work as this NGO, and are still finding themselves accepting volunteers as a viable option. It follows that in recognizing that this unregulated practice will continue, rather than condemning it, it seems more pertinent to ask how we can make it better.

**Ways Forward**

*If you have come to help me, you are wasting my time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together (Watson, 1985).*

This research has revealed that despite the challenges that volunteer tourism presents to host communities several of the participants in this study recognize the value in hosting volunteers. What earlier respondents reported as beneficial was the cultural exchange, the opportunity to learn new things, and the development of friendships. Despite all the critique that followed the findings first discussed, several participants did attest to gaining something from volunteer tourism, and I draw the reader’s attention back to these earlier comments in recognition that there are at once multiple realities in any given context. Smith (1999) explains:

To be able to share, to have something worth sharing, gives dignity to the giver. To accept a gift and reciprocate gives dignity to the receiver. To create something new through that process of sharing is to recreate the old, to reconnect relationships and to recreate our humanness. (p. 105)

This is most likely where volunteer tourism’s potential realistically rests – in coming up with humble, interpersonal ways to find and foster humanity amidst the macro-structures of globalization.

Several conclusions can be drawn from what this data has revealed, but this section will focus our attention on three basic ‘design principles’ that all stakeholders in the volunteer tourism movement would do well to consider. These are offerings of best practice, from three perspectives. As a first design
principle: If you are a sending agency, Northern NGO, or alternative tourism travel provider, while your responsibility may rest with your client, your claim to responsible tourism rests with the receiving community. Recent studies on volunteer tourism have revealed direct evidence of very minimal local control when sending agencies are involved (Hervik, 2008), and an ongoing situation in which claims to ‘community development’ are largely unmonitored (Nelson, 2010). Thus, as you link with a Southern NGO assure that they are a full partner in assessing the actual needs, designing the proposed project, selecting the volunteers, and substantially contributing to program evaluations in order to make adjustments. If they have no role in who arrives on their doorstep, why would they be ‘empowered’ by what transpires? Not only does it undermine their agency to have unskilled strangers knocking on their doors, it reinforces a colonial mindset whereby the West continues playing and practicing in the sandbox of the Rest. The first design principle then is for Northern-based partners: do nothing before listening, make sure you are wanted, and proceed in a participatory way, or not at all.

The second design principle is this: Southern-based NGOs involved in volunteer tourism should actively take control of this alternative tourism niche. It is in your midst, but it is often not in your control. There is opportunity here for this to be a truly community-based tourism, but it depends on you. When you are in control of hosting volunteers, maintain strict watch over this, and do not let approaching sending agencies sell your NGO to their customers in the West. Instead, present your organization on its own terms, under its own name, if you decide you want to attract outsiders. Crucial to gaining control of volunteer tourism in your midst involves providing an orientation process that sensitizes volunteers. Do not presume they know anything about your culture. Do presume you have the right to teach them how to behave. Not only is this your right, it is a unique opportunity. If you choose to host volunteers, a one day induction will not do, as immersing oneself in a foreign culture can be fundamentally unsettling. You may not realize that your volunteer is in some degree of ongoing culture shock, even if they appear confident and imposing, and that this can have important impacts on their behaviour. Volunteering, in any context, needs to be facilitated. Part of this process involves talking with
your staff and your community, and deciding what is and is not appropriate. What will you accept, and what will you reject? Write policies. Ask for deposits. If you are arranging the placement yourselves, challenge people before they arrive on what their intentions are. Assuming the sending agency is doing this a false step. Before you invite a stranger into your home, assess whether they will respect you, your culture, and your organization. Control is key.

The third design principle is for the voluntourist, and is an extension of the first and the second principle. As a volunteer, you may still feel you have something distinct to offer, and that your expertise or good nature is needed. It is possible you are right. So ask. Ask your host organization, not your sending agency. Rather, scrap your sending agency altogether. If you want to volunteer overseas, there is a good chance you want to see your savings go towards organizations that actually need it. When I volunteered in India prior to this research, I discovered (by asking) that a shameful fraction of the cost of my placement went to the host family that took care of me as if I was their own. Is any host family in a position to bargain for better pay when they are entirely marginalized from the process of decision making? Does even the NGO you are volunteering with have any say in the breakdown of the revenue received through the price tag you paid your sending agency? Next, educate yourselves. What kind of misguided thinking is it that leads you to see yourself as an expert in a foreign land with foreign cultures and several foreign languages, by virtue of your international mobility? To help anyone, you need to know something about them. If you think you know something about them, drop this presumption as soon as it arrives, and discard your agenda. To close, in combination these three design principles comprise a basic outline which is the outcome of an inquiry that has sought to be solution focused.

In describing an indigenous paradigm Wilson (2008) suggests that focusing on problems does nothing to bring us together, and while blindness to problems is similarly non-constructive, I have sought to inquire into the relationships that volunteer tourism can bring about. This was done by asking a question, not posing a problem. The director of the Indian Diaspora program expressed that to refuse to meet with me would have been racism, as I represent something different, not only in color but in my
topic of inquiry. This reflection is suggestive that, much like racism, total avoidance is not where answers
are found or relationships formed. Indeed, avoidance of the kind of dialogue this research has listened
for may inadvertently perpetuate the racist stance that sees the Southern ‘Other’ as passive in volunteer
tourism and insignificant to the transformation of the Northern visitor. Further, this research recognizes
that intercultural/international dialogue and solidarity are often the result of travelling overseas and of
personally encountering those ‘life-changing experiences’. It would be hypocritical not to acknowledge
that this process impacts one’s inclination to be a global citizen.

I have presented a spectrum of perspectives from people in India and Uganda doing this work in
the hope that it contributes to opening up this dialogue. I have argued that development and tourism
scholars can underestimate or misinterpret the degree of agency that NGOs in receiving communities
bring to their interactions with volunteer visitors, despite inequitable starting points. I conclude by
offering suggestions for areas of future research. Researchers should ask more questions to more people
in the South about their experiences with alternative and volunteer tourism, and about what they
envision for the future. A practical area of research would be to explore the creation of manuals for
cultural induction of volunteer tourists by Northern and Southern NGOs, which would provide a
template for teaching the information needed to build relationships based on respect. Additionally,
future research should explore the viability of facilitating more South-North exchanges, which above all
demonstrate the most sincere approach to intercultural learning. These areas would help enhance our
understanding of the purpose of such programs – be it cultural exchange, development, or solidarity –
and how these exchanges may become more equitable.
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