

While many have celebrated the merging of service to others and development with tourism, some critics have emerged, and correctly so. Things can get complicated when for profit businesses get involved in eco or community based projects.

Some operators sell a smoke and mirrors volunteer placement, talking vaguely about money into communities, obscuring the details, and making the volunteer feel uncomfortable about asking pointed questions – Too often volunteers are told money goes into the community, only to find out 75% of the money stayed with the inbound operator!

So, like any travel transaction, there needs to be an education of the consumer. They need to be encouraged to ask questions. There should be clarity.

“Those of us that sell or facilitate volunteer placements need to be thorough, and cautious about who we do business with. While it is difficult to turn down business, we need to develop long-standing partnerships. Its not that complicated. Who do you want to do business with? What are the chances of it leading to a long-term sustainable business for yourself and of real benefit to the communities with whom you work?” Paul Miedema of Calabash Tours our local partner in Port Elizabeth

For host communities, there are a number of issues that need to be considered in order to minimise negative impacts. A common occurrence is that communities, who are often eager for assistance, and vulnerable, are bullied or exploited by volunteer service providers. All too often a project receiving volunteers, has little say in the volume or experience of volunteers placed. The result is sometimes a school with 10 or 12 “volunteers” hanging around with little to do other than get in the way of hard pressed local people. I have witnessed this in the townships of Port Elizabeth where I am as I write this article.

I believe skills need to be matched to community need – these may be life skills not professional qualifications – but they should be appropriate. And I have serious doubts about certain volunteer projects that require no skill, but only labour. Most countries that attract voluntourists have high unemployment rates - cheap labour is not needed.

Another sensitive but critical issue is the screening of volunteers. Volunteers often work with children in poor communities, and with vulnerable adults. It takes real courage for commercial organisations to reject potential customers. To run a responsible programme – this must be a given.

The [Cape Town Declaration](#) states that tourism should ‘actively involve the local community in planning and decision-making, and provide capacity-building to make this a reality.’ This approach should also be applied to volunteering.

The most effective and sustainable projects originate in the local community – NOT with inbound operators! Many volunteer organisations justify the lack of community involvement in the design and monitoring of a project, by asserting that often communities cannot identify their development needs do not have the capacity to

monitor and manage the projects. I do not buy into this – it is challenging to work with grass roots projects but there are local people who know their communities far better than inbound operators ever could – eg. local ground operators who already demonstrate their commitment to their communities and the objectives of responsible tourism. With the support of such organisations communities can identify where they need help – This is the model we have chosen to work with – there are other models that will deliver a meaningful programme

Despite potential negative impacts, a well prepared, screened, skilled volunteer can make a positive impact in host communities.

Well-run volunteer placements can develop a level of social interaction and understanding that is profound. It can result in the humanising of poverty, it can give a face to poverty and vulnerability that is real.

It is often a life changing experience for the volunteer.

An experience that shapes purpose and belief, and can shift consciousness towards the understanding of a shared humanity. It can and does lead to an understanding of our interconnectedness as people.

“I went to offer what help I could. They gave me so much more in return”

Well managed it can be a win win situation for all the stakeholders – be they profit making commercial operators, travellers, and most important – the communities themselves.