

Volunteer Tourists and the SDGs in Bali: Agents of Development or Redundant Holiday-Makers?

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Volunteer tourism is an ever-growing phenomenon and a multi-million-pounds industry, particularly in developing countries. Despite the manifold criticism for its neo-colonial nature – self-centered volunteers who romanticize the Global South as ‘poor but happy’ and short-term projects that create dependency rather than local capacity – it can, at the same time, be seen as a key engine for socio-economic development. The privatization and neo-liberalization of development has led to governments and development agencies increasingly delegating responsibilities to the volunteer, who takes on the role of an agent of development – continuing in times of the SDGs-driven Agenda 2030. However, little research to date tries to understand volunteers’ perceived developmental impact to link it with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that characterize the current development agenda. This paper, therefore, offers one of the first attempts to bridge the gap between volunteers’ experiences, their felt impact, and the SDGs by drawing on ethnographic data gathered in a volunteer project teaching English in the North of Bali. Its aim is to start a discussion as to whether and under which conditions volunteer tourism can be a viable instrument in line with Agenda 2030. Findings identify a range of obstacles for volunteer tourism in the Balinese context to be in line with the SDGs. These include a lack of needed skills and feeling of uselessness on volunteers’ part, expectations that are set too high through marketing, a lack of coordination, and the fact that projects don’t focus on the marginalized. However, there are also indications that volunteer tourism holds strong potential to put the SDGs’ universality into practice, and hence dissolve some of the binaries between North and South, and rich and poor – thereby creating true reciprocal partnerships, rather than encounters that are characterized by neo-colonial Othering.

Keywords: Bali; SDGs; Sustainable Development; Volunteer Tourism; Voluntourism



INTRODUCTION

Volunteer tourism is a steadily growing trend and a more than 173-billion-dollar industry with a ‘make a difference’ tagline, particularly in developing countries (Pariyar, 2017). Many have attempted to define volunteer tourism, but the most commonly used definition was established by Wearing (2001), who suggests that

the generic term ‘volunteer tourism’ applies to those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that might

involve aiding or alleviating poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society or environment. (p. 1)

In other words, voluntourism is an increasingly popular activity, in which people combine travel, leisure, and recreation with voluntary work. Butcher and Smith (2010) suggest that the growth in volunteerism is associated with young adults, who constitute the majority of the voluntourism market, seeking to make a difference in the world while searching for their identity.

Volunteer tourism's increased popularity and constant growth, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region (Milne, Thorburn, Hermann, Hopkins, & Moscoso, 2018), have attracted society's attention, which makes it a widely researched phenomenon. The most researched aspects are volunteers' motivation to engage in programs, with early studies focusing on altruism and egoism as the two main, though opposing, motivations (Lepp, 2008; Tomazos & Butler, 2010). However, research has gradually shifted towards more critical investigations, particularly the impacts of volunteer tourism on host societies (Loiseau et al., 2016; Raymond & Hall, 2008), and volunteer tourism's developmental role (Butcher & Smith, 2015). Volunteer tourism is, indeed, a phenomenon that "combine(s) the hedonism of tourism with the altruism of development work" (Simpson, 2004, p. 681) and thus deserves closer investigation from a development perspective. Some argue that the steady rise in volunteering has emerged out of the privatization and neo-liberalization of development, with governments and development agencies delegating responsibilities to the volunteer, who increasingly takes on the role of an agent of development (Howard & Burns, 2015; Luh Sin, Oakes, & Mostafanezhad, 2015; Melles, 2018). Others have begun to relate volunteer tourism to the achievement of the SDGs, which have been agreed on in 2015, addressing global challenges humanity faces, including those related to poverty, hunger, inequality, climate, environmental degradation, prosperity, peace, and justice (UNWTO, 2017). In order to move from commitment to actions and results, all stakeholders need to engage and actively participate, "leaving no one behind" (UNWTO, 2017, p. 7). These goals have been linked to volunteer tourism, for example, through an attempt to bridge the gap between national and international volunteering agendas within the new global context that is set by the SDGs (Devereux, Paul, Hawkes, & Georgeou, 2017), and through the questioning of post-colonial power structures in the achievement of overcoming the North-South divide – an essential idea characterizing Agenda 2030 (Howard & Burns, 2015). In this context, the voluntourist again emerges as a main 'agent of change' (UN, 2015) in the achievement of the SDGs on the ground (Scheinert, Gufer, Polak, & Bruder, 2019).

While much research has focused on volunteers' motivations to engage in volunteer tourism (Lepp, 2008; Tomazos & Butler, 2010), only little research so far has attempted to understand the *perceived* impact volunteers have on the locality (Coghlan, 2007; Palacios, 2010). Even less research to date has related volunteers' perception of their developmental impact to the SDGs, particularly to see how volunteer tourism is placed to contribute to the SDGs more broadly, but also specific goals and indicators. Hence, this paper offers one of the first attempts in bridging the gap between volunteers' experiences, their felt impact, and the SDGs in the regional context of Southeast Asia. In an educational voluntourism context, such as in the present study, volunteering could particularly contribute to Goals 4 (quality education) and

8 (decent work and economic growth). More specifically, targets 4.1 - 4.7, 4.C, and 8.9 could directly be addressed through volunteer tourism – all of which will be discussed later on in this paper.

Bali has been chosen as the case study for this research, given its popularity as a tourism – but specifically also as a voluntourism – destination in Southeast Asia (Mostafanezhad, 2014). Bali, an island highly dependent on the tourist dollar, partly in the form of foreign investors but also as an important source of local income, has been well known as the gateway to Indonesia for tourists (Nuryanti, 2001; Pickel-Chevalier, 2017). Indonesia currently occupies place number 111 out of 189 in the human development index ranking (UNDP, 2019), turning Bali into an island where leisure often meets humanitarian work (Onda, 2011). Nevertheless, Bali faces increasing problems due to an overdevelopment of tourism (now, however, interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic), often marginalizing local residents and compromising environmental sustainability (MacRae, 2010). To foster a more sustainable development, the Indonesian government has adopted the “Indonesia SDGs Roadmap,” for a smoother implementation of the SDGs, showing that the country works actively towards these goals (Ministry of National Development Planning Indonesia, n.d.). This paper’s aim is therefore to investigate volunteers’ perceived impacts as development agents in the island of Bali and relate this to the SDGs to start a discussion as to whether volunteer tourism can be a viable instrument in line with Agenda 2030. This paper therefore is part of the wider debate on tourism’s contribution to the SDGs, which deserves closer attention (Boluk, Cavaliere, & Higgins-Desbiolles 2019).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Impacts of Volunteer Tourism

Volunteer tourism has experienced much criticism, both from academics and the industry alike. Criticism relates particularly to the nature of volunteer tourism projects, which are often short-term placements that generate concerns about their negative impacts and the lack of benefit to local people (Tourism Concern, 2014). One of the key criticisms focuses on volunteer tourism being seen as a form of neo-imperialism, where unskilled and inexperienced teenagers from wealthier Western countries travel to developing countries to perform oftentimes unsatisfactory work due to volunteers’ lack of skills (Laurie & Baillie Smith, 2017). Oftentimes, volunteers are driven merely by self-centered motivations, such as, cultural immersion, experiencing a new country, or simply improving their CVs (McGloin & Georgeou, 2016). Despite these frequently selfish motives, Brown and Morrison (2003) argue that the only ‘skill’ required by most volunteer tourism organizations is the desire to help others. This, nonetheless, often results in cases where local residents have to rebuild houses constructed by volunteers, or where children gain very little educational advantage – despite an entertaining time spent with the volunteer (Pycroft, 2016).

Guttentag (2009) points out that many volunteer tourism projects, especially those that are short-term, actually bring little benefit to the host communities. When volunteer tourists leave, locals have to cope with their everyday lives again without any help, which in turn creates a dependency relationship. For instance,

some authors suggest that building local capacity, as well as engaging in longer-term projects, would be more useful and avoid the dependency relationship many projects create (Devereux et al., 2017; Howard & Burns, 2015). Volunteer organizations could provide tools, training, and instructions to residents (e.g., for construction work), which would contribute to community development and could create jobs, instead of sending a group of inexperienced teenagers to do the job. However, as Howard & Burns (2005) argue, volunteer tourism often tends to “privilege... the professional development of workers from the North” (p. 9).

Overall, the industry has been strongly criticized in that agencies charge volunteers thousands of dollars, whilst only contributing small portions of that money to residents, allowing the agencies themselves to thrive (Brightsmith, Stronza, & Holle, 2008). Pariyar (2017) claims that an average agency charges about USD 1,000 for a month of volunteering, of which only half reaches partner organizations in developing countries due to advertising costs, staff salary, and other organizational costs. From the remaining USD 500 that the partner organization receives, again only half of the amount goes to the project on the ground, which is what should ideally make the difference in local communities. However, as discussed above, oftentimes the support that residents receive does not even reach those areas where help is really needed (Howard & Burns, 2015). Instead, particularly “as the trip length decreases, the volunteering placements are designed more for the convenience of the volunteer rather than to support local community needs” (Howard & Burns, 2015, p. 9). Financial transparency, therefore, remains a key criticism and problem of volunteer tourism (Melles, 2018).

In addition to the above, one of the main arguments against volunteer tourism is the contentious interactions it generates with children. The media (particularly social media and photographic material) reinforces a “consistent representation of a hegemonic narrative regarding the relationship between children from the Global South as in need of care by young people from the Global North” (Mostafanezhad, 2014, p. 115), which stimulates charitable giving by volunteers. At times, volunteer tourism can even lead to the trafficking of children (Punaks & Feit, 2014). Voluntourism is a billion-pound industry, and the majority of organizations that send volunteers abroad are for-profit travel agencies that charge high fees to customers. This leads to some orphanages being set up by corrupt ‘entrepreneurs,’ who treat children as commodities, and whose main motive is profit, not the well-being of the children. It is estimated that anywhere between 50-90% of ‘orphan’ children worldwide have at least one living parent (Mathews, 2020). Furthermore, the cost of some programs – for example, two weeks’ teaching in Cambodia at a minimum of GBP 1,145 (excluding visa or flights costs) – would be enough to pay a local teacher for more than a year (Purvis & Kennedy, 2016). Mustonen (2007) particularly criticizes short-term voluntourism and points out that volunteering at schools and orphanages can be harmful to children, as they get attached to their caregivers easily. As a result, losses experienced by young children may leave them vulnerable and even put them at risk of mental health problems, which is likely to affect their long-term well-being. Yet, it is particularly the child of the Global South that forms the “object of compassion,” as Mostafanezhad (2013, p. 320) calls it when critiquing volunteer tourism as the expansion of neoliberalism into ‘aidland’.

Points of critique against volunteer tourism, however, do not just center on its impacts on the host population, but also on the tourists themselves. There is a chance

that volunteer tourists might end up feeling disillusioned through their experience, essentially believing that they engaged in a selfish act by volunteering (Sinervo, 2011). This is often the case when work with children is involved, turning the volunteer tourism industry into “a moral economy because all actors struggle with the moral implications of marketing ‘experiences with poor children’ as a commodity, to be bought and sold” (Sinervo, 2011, p. 17). In addition, research has noted that even if voluntourists may have positive experiences while being abroad, they might struggle re-integrating into their daily lives back home due to a reverse culture shock (Grabowski, 2013).

On the other hand, despite the criticisms of volunteer tourism, there are certain benefits to both host communities and individual volunteers. One of the key benefits, as discussed by McMillon, Cutchins, and Geissing (2006), is that volunteer tourism can be an eye-opening, life-changing, and transformational experience that affects young individuals in deep and long-lasting ways, making them also more aware of pressing issues and poverty in developing countries. McIntosh & Zahra’s (2007) research on volunteer tourists revealed that, after their programs, volunteers gained three kinds of experiences: those relating to the self; those relating to the destination’s culture; and those relating to interactions with local residents. These experiences contribute to volunteers’ later changes of behavior, perceptions of society, self-identities, or values, and often makes an individual more interested in contributing to solving some of society’s issues or even motivate others to do so (Scheinert et al., 2019).

Secondly, according to Holmes and Smith (2009), further positive outcomes of voluntourism on local communities are social development, improvements in education and health, and a general improvement in lifestyle. Volunteers from developed countries aim to share their knowledge and help improve local residents’ living conditions in different ways, to make locals’ lives easier. Although volunteer tourism is said to be a key reinforcement of the “demonstration effect” – which, according to Simpson (2004), happens when Western volunteer tourists are being seen as modelling a way of living to the local residents that the latter then aspire to – this may indeed have a positive impact. Volunteers with higher standards of living can often contribute to locals working towards better health, lower crime rates, improved educational performance, and greater life satisfaction (Press Association, 2004). On the other hand, this effect is criticized and blamed for eroding local cultures and changing local residents’ habits and behaviors, leaving them unsatisfied with their lives and in search of a very Western-centric development path (Guttentag, 2009). This leads into a wider debate on the role of volunteers and volunteer tourism for development – also in relation to the SDGs. The two SDGs that are particularly worth looking at in the present context of an educational voluntourism program are Goals number 4 (quality education) and 8 (decent work and economic growth).

Volunteer Tourism for Development and the SDGs

Despite the range of negative impacts that volunteer tourism is known for, research has shown that volunteers are not necessarily aware of these impacts (Milne et al., 2018). In fact, volunteers’ expectations of the impacts they are, or will be making, are oftentimes unrealistic (Palacios, 2010). Coghlan (2007) argues that

organizations' promotional material highly influences volunteers' expectations, and points out that unrealistic images and goals on the websites often create a mismatch between volunteers' experiences and expectations, which leads to decreased satisfaction levels and lowered volunteer motivation and commitment later on in the project. In addition, Raymond and Hall (2008) notice that if volunteer tourism programs are not carefully managed, they might be reinforcing cultural stereotypes and lead to cross-cultural misunderstanding. Organizations present volunteering opportunities as exotic and people as 'other', which is appealing to individuals looking for alternative cultural experiences and escape from their routine (Henry, 2016). According to Simpson (2004), voluntourism thus often creates stereotypes of residents in developing countries, portraying them as poor and incapable of development. Despite volunteer tourists' lack of experience and absence of relevant skills as discussed above, they often hold the belief – driven by great enthusiasm and willingness to travel and discover the world – that they can be more helpful to developing countries than local people (Georgeou & Haas, 2019). Interestingly, volunteer tourists may also feel that they can only make a true impact in developing countries, rather than their home country (Mostafanezhad, 2013). This puts volunteer tourists into a seemingly elevated position as agents of development, raising volunteers' expectations of the actual contribution they will be making, which makes their role in sustainable development questionable.

Some argue that volunteering, particularly long-term and requiring specialist skills, may be seen as an essential part of development work and beneficial to host communities (UNV 2018; Milne et al., 2018). Indeed, a range of authors recognize the developmental role of volunteer tourism, taking the shape of development assistance with a commercial component (Schech, 2017; Scheinert et al., 2019). In many countries in Southeast Asia (such as in Thailand and Cambodia), volunteer tourism was seen by the private sector and governments as a more sustainable form of tourism for development, particularly in its early beginnings (Mostafanezhad, 2014).

An increasing number of authors views volunteer tourism as a main contributor to the SDGs (Devereux et al., 2017; Howard & Burns, 2015), which currently shape the development agenda up to 2030. Tourists hereby are one of the key stakeholders or "agents of change" as the UNV (United Nations Volunteers) (2015) call them, needed to actively participate in order to "leav[e] no one behind" (UNWTO, 2017, p. 7). Franco and Shahrokh (2015) even argue that long-term volunteering encourages the integration of the volunteer into the local community, minimizing the negative impact of the 'foreigner' and strengthening a sense of partnership rather than the simple transferring of expertise, which is one of the aims of the SDGs.

Others confirm the positive role that volunteer tourism can play in the achievement of the SDGs. The German programme *weltwärts*, for example, can be regarded as one of the best examples of companies that align conceptually with the contents and principles of the SDGs and promote education in line with Goal 4 (Scheinert et al., 2019). Research shows that returning *weltwärts* volunteers show greater ability to empathize with people from the host country, improve language acquisition, and promote inclusivity (Scheinert et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the UN Volunteers Annual Report (UNV, 2018) reveals a range of ways volunteers have contributed to the SDGs in 2018. These include, for example,

environmental initiatives such as encouraging people to protect local ecosystems, volunteers with specialized experience in sustainable energy solutions contributing to Goals for the Planet (Goals 7, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15), training and capacity building to fight unemployment and contribute to Goals for Prosperity (Goals 8, 9, 10), and healthcare and women's training programs, thereby, contributing to Goals for the People (Goals 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6) (UNV, 2018). Two SDGs that are particularly relevant in the educational voluntourism program – in the present context – are Goals 4 (quality education) and 8 (decent work and economic growth). More specifically, targets 4.1 to 4.6 (all of which broadly center around the equal access to education and training), 4.7 (ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development), 4.C (increase the supply of qualified teachers in developing countries, also through train-the-trainers programs), and 8.9 (devise and implement policies to advocate sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products) could directly be addressed through volunteer tourism.

Case Study Context: Volunteer Tourism in Bali

Bali is one of the world's most visited islands, and the leading tourism destination in Indonesia. Before the current pandemic, it was expected to attract over 18.2 million visitors in 2020 with its magnificent nature and enchanting culture (Woods, 2018). However, due to the current COVID-19 crisis, Balinese tourism has also come to a sudden halt. Tourism and the creative economy are the main vehicles helping to increase economic growth and the welfare of the people (Pratiwi, Sulatra, & Candra, 2019). Bali's key tourist attractions are its culture, nature, surfing scene, and beaches; however, volunteer tourists are particularly attracted beyond the glitzy tourism centers by the rural areas, which are often characterized by certain levels of poverty. Just like in the Asia-Pacific region as a whole, volunteer tourism in Bali has therefore been on a steady rise. Research has shown that the Asia-Pacific region is a particularly popular region for volunteer programs, with over 250 organizations across 21 countries (Milne et al., 2018). With Thailand on the top of the list (with 104 organizations), Indonesia has a total of 36 volunteer tourism organizations (Milne et al., 2018).

The present research has been conducted with one of the organizations¹ on the island of Bali, offering educational, leisure, and environmental conservation programs. The organization itself says very little about what they understand about community engagement, though – with no clear information about the impact they are making or transparency in regard to where the money goes. Sustainability has no mention on the organization's website – although the Indonesian Government communicates a clear vision on the importance of sustainable development to protect the natural and cultural resources (ILO, 2012). Sustainable tourism – including volunteer tourism programs in Bali – if well planned and managed, can make a direct and positive contribution to Indonesia's achievement of the SDGs, inclusive of poverty reduction, rural development, preservation of culture and society, gender equity, and environmental protection (ILO, 2012).

¹ The organization's name is kept anonymous here.

The program that is part of the present research is an English teaching program taking place at a local school on the Northern coast of Bali. Volunteers received a 'pre-departure' guide, emailed to all the volunteers prior to their departure, stating that it is entirely up to a volunteer what one decides to teach, with a general syllabus to follow, but that no previous teaching experience is required. Upon arrival, none of the additional information about the program was given, except that volunteer coordinators showed participants where to find the materials for teaching and all the tools needed to prepare for their lessons.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses qualitative methods and an interpretive approach, which enables an understanding of the multiple realities of research participants (Jennings, 2001). The main focus of this research is on the feelings, experiences, and personal impacts of volunteer tourists in Bali, with the findings being based on the interpretations of behavior and conversations with participants, as well as on a reflection of one researcher's (the second author of this paper) own personal experience of being involved in this project. This research adopts a qualitative approach to data collection, which relies on words, images, and sounds (Veal, 2011), and helps to interpret the personal experiences, meanings, attitudes, and volunteer tourists' behavior in Bali.

More specifically, this study draws on empirical research in Bali conducted by one of the authors, consisting of ethnographic methods, particularly participant observations of the social settings through interviews as well as conversations (Brewer, 2000). Whilst volunteering in Bali, the researcher collecting the data was a participant and an observer for four weeks (one week in a cultural program, two weeks spent volunteering, and one week in a leisure program), keeping a personal diary with observations of people and the environment, taking notes and recording conversations. According to Silverman (2016), when engaging in participant observations, the researcher joins a group of people and their activities, and at the same time, becomes a part of the group and the phenomenon being studied. In this case, the researcher was participating in a volunteering program while living in a house with other volunteers, observing their actions, and recording their feelings in formal and informal conversations, and interviews over a duration of two weeks.

Interviews with volunteers were semi-structured, which means that there was a rough guideline but room for flexibility. It gave volunteers the opportunity to express themselves, their feelings, and opinions, which enhanced the richness of data and gave the researcher a broader understanding of the topic. Conversations in the field were held with around 20 volunteers, and three additional volunteers were interviewed via Skype after their return in order to get an even richer account of the phenomenon under study. Both interviews and conversations were conducted in English, given that the research focus was on international volunteers rather than local residents. Interviews (both in person and via Skype) were recorded and then transcribed to serve purposes of data analysis. Conversations were recorded whenever suitable or kept note of in a field diary. Direct quotes in the text therefore often stemmed from formal interviews, while informal conversations with other volunteers were paraphrased.

In addition to conversations, interviews, and observations, the researcher who collected the empirical data engaged in self-reflection while on fieldwork. Given that she was a part of the social world under study by being a volunteer herself, it was worthwhile reflecting on her personal experience and beliefs when it comes to the volunteering project. This involved keeping a personal diary with detailed description of feelings, emotions, thoughts, experiences, and interactions with other volunteers, local residents, and the environment. It also meant recording thoughts and reflecting while teaching English at the local school, which in turn supported the research with an in-depth analysis of on-the-ground volunteer experiences. Self-reflection was therefore used in order to “make oneself the object of one’s own observation, in an attempt to bring to the fore the assumptions embedded in our perspectives and descriptions of the world” (Feighery, 2006, p. 269), which is also why parts of the findings were written up in first person. By taking time to record significant moments while volunteering, the researcher gained a better understanding of her own emotions and experience as a volunteer, which fostered a comprehensive and critical discussion of the personal experience (Dolezal, Trupp, & Leepreecha, 2020; Holliday, 2016).

The data analysis consisted mainly of thematic analysis of the interviews and diary to help recognize patterns and make sense of the large quantity of research material (Patton, 2002). Thematic analysis has been applied to both the researcher’s diary as well as the transcripts of in-depth interviews to present findings of volunteers’ feelings and experiences while volunteering in Bali.

FINDINGS

Volunteers’ Role in Local Development: What is the Whole Point?

Overall, a feeling of being useless emerged as one of the strongest themes in the research. Most volunteers, including myself, shared the feeling of being of little use to the destination, and generally lacking a bigger purpose beyond the tasks they were completing. At the beginning of the project, I was assigned to volunteer with two young women who had already been volunteering for one month. They had their own teaching schedules and techniques, spoke basic Indonesian (*Bahasa Indonesia*) with the children, and had tasks prepared for the classes already. Due to the large number of volunteers, I had to join these women’s class, even though they did not need any help. I circulated in the class, although the children were coping well with the assigned tasks. I felt like my presence was not needed and I was not benefitting anyone, which I reflected on in my personal diary:

I felt useless walking around the class, smiling at kids, and not being able to communicate with them. I know I am new and inexperienced, but all of us want to make an impact. Both of them [the two more experienced volunteers] had some techniques of teaching, they were close to the children already and I felt a bit awkward. I felt like I was not needed there at all.

My feelings were quite strong in that I was doubting the usefulness of my presence and even the possibility of making a change, which was one of my main motivations

to join the program. I had booked my volunteering trip through an organization whose promotional material used words that created an expectation that one would make a truly positive change in the destination. Expecting to ‘make a change’ and feel important, it was truly upsetting to be walking around and feeling completely redundant. As Coghlan (2007) points out, a mismatch between volunteer’s expectations, created by the promotional material of the organization, and the actual experiences, often leads to decreased volunteer motivation and commitment (Coren & Gray, 2012), which I experienced first-hand.

Jacob (26 years old, Portugal), who was involved in the teaching program as well, admitted feeling similarly: “The people who did teaching and construction programs felt like there was not any main goal. There was not a big purpose, a plan or a project to work on. That is what we were all lacking.” Bigger disappointments, however, came from the group of volunteers engaging in construction work. Many of the volunteers had booked their trip through another organization, which advertised the construction program using words that pointed towards the important role that volunteers would play in the renovation and infrastructure of the local community, thereby setting high expectations of the contributions volunteers would make.

Having created these expectations, all of the volunteers I have spoken to were truly disappointed with their experience. The reality was, that they were sent to the local school to scrub the paint off a perfectly fine-looking wall and repaint it after. Volunteers therefore felt like they were completing tasks that were not important or useful to the community at all. This is how Isaac (20 years old, UK) referred to the program: “I felt that the work we were doing was not having an impact on the local community and that the [organization] was just finding something to fill our time,” which demonstrates the disappointment and feelings of uselessness that volunteers shared. This has been noted also in previous research, such as in Womack’s (2012) study on the efficacy of voluntourism in Latin America, emphasizing the ineffective nature of volunteer tourism organizations who often tend to mismatch supply and demand.

According to Tomazos (2010), volunteer tourism organizations successfully create and shape the demand of volunteer tourists through purposefully designed marketing, ensuring that volunteers are portrayed as a new kind of tourists who have empathy to help the ones in need. Therefore, many volunteers in the project under study had high expectations of programs and their personal impacts. However, due to a high demand for volunteers, there was not much left to do in the school. The reality of voluntary work can be very different from prior expectations, with tasks that are not directly connected to the main aims of a project, therefore leaving volunteers feeling disappointed or detached from the communities they are trying to help (Tourism Concern, 2014).

Relating to volunteers’ frustrations about being useless, an interesting observation could be made: some took their own initiative in order to feel like they were making an impact. An excellent example for this is Ignacio (24 years old, Panama), who had spent the whole summer teaching English with the organization in the North of Bali. Being truly driven by his altruistic intentions, he felt like he was not making an impact or benefiting the local community in any way. Therefore, he decided to go beyond the program and help his newly made local friend rebuild and refurbish

his house. By offering his free time and covering all necessary expenses, Ignacio thus made a positive impact on one local family. Given that the family did not have enough money to purchase items they needed to renew their house, Ignacio offered his help. His story illustrates how strong his willingness to benefit the local community was. He noticed the issues with the volunteer program, saw another opportunity to make an impact, and invested his resources and energy into the right places. He seemed to turn into a true ‘agent of change’ (UN, 2015), going beyond the space of development action that the organization creates, thus demonstrating his obvious dissatisfaction with the commercialized and somewhat superficial nature of volunteer tourism. Although volunteer tourism tends to “perpetuate... a popular humanitarian gaze that reframes contemporary humanitarianism as an empathetic gesture of commoditized concern” (Mostafanezhad, 2014, p. 111), the present organization’s project did not seem enough for Ignacio to feel the compassion that the industry tries to create.

Taking into consideration Ignacio’s story and the feelings of being useless that many volunteers experienced, the question that emerged amongst many of us was, how many local families could we have truly helped, creating long-term benefits and working together, if we had used the money we paid to the organization to instead contribute directly? This raises another issue, which is that of the money lost through intermediary organizations. For instance, Ian Breckenridge-Jackson, one of the volunteers who helped to rebuild houses after Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, calculated that if the USD 1.1 billion spent on volunteer travel costs – such as getting volunteers to New Orleans, feeding and accommodating them – would have instead been used for rebuilding houses, 10,576 houses could have been built instead of 2,039, a five times greater impact (Tedx Talks, 2013). Many of the volunteers working with the present organization had similar concerns about the amount of money they had paid and how much of it reached the community: “I would like to see where that money is going. There were not many employees at the [organization] that I saw, probably around ten and few of them were not even Balinese” (Sarah, 22 years old, USA). Isaac expressed similar concerns:

I am fine with paying that USD 940, as long as the money goes to the local community. Many locals need to refurbish their houses and they need materials and furniture. That is the real issue; this would be more helpful for them. And now, most of that USD 940 I have paid goes to the organization. Maybe it even makes sense for the volunteer tourism organizations to give us projects like wall scrubbing because paint does not cost much, does it?

These quotes evidence the concerns volunteers had about the economic side of the project, with most of them wondering whether their money was used effectively. It is definitely not unusual for voluntourists to feel ambivalent about the financial benefit that really reaches the local community, which has also been noted in previous research, as in Coren & Gray’s (2012) study on voluntourism in Thailand. Most tourists in the present study paid between USD 800 and USD 1500 for the volunteering programs, although none knew what percentage of that sum went to the local communities. The organization had no reports or data about it either. As Paris (2014) points out, those volunteer tourism organizations that openly state the least about

being responsible are the ones that cost the most, as they tend to hide the origins of their costs, which may also hide excessive profit margins. Assuming that the project costs in Bali were minimal – with paint, tools for painting, pencils, coloring pens, paper and such being rather cheap, and accommodation being rather basic (we did not always have warm water in the showers and slept with six other people in one room) – it can be estimated that the majority of the money volunteers paid went to the organization as well as international partner organizations.

Volunteers' Challenges in Becoming Agents for Development

Several challenges could be noticed for volunteers in their hopes for making a lasting change to the location and residents. One challenge that strongly emerged from the findings was the lack of relevant skills volunteers had for performing their assigned work. This was particularly an issue for those volunteers teaching English. Surprisingly, none of the organizations have mentioned the importance of being able to communicate in both languages (i.e., English and the local language) when teaching English (also see: Nomnian, Trupp, Niyomthong, Tangcharoensathaporn, & Charoenkonka, 2020). According to Guttentag (2009), the fact that many volunteerism projects have minimal or non-existent requirements regarding the skillsets needed to participate is one of the reasons why the volunteer tourism sector has expanded and grown so rapidly. Therefore, some authors question the benefits of short-term volunteers, who are not familiar with the local culture or language, and stay for a very short period of time (Callanan & Thomas, 2005; Simpson, 2004). The duration of the program under study was only two weeks and I, personally, had been so driven by my willingness to experience volunteering, that I had not even thought of the importance of speaking both languages when teaching:

I have no idea how it did not occur to me before that in order to teach a language, in order to be a good teacher you should be able to speak both languages well. How am I supposed to help someone if I cannot understand what they need help with? How can I answer the question if I cannot understand it? Knowledge of both languages is very important. It really strengthens the connection between you and the children. (personal diary)

Again, I felt frustrated that I did not have the necessary skills to perform the best work I could have, which again links back to feeling useless and unnecessary in the project. Jacob and Sarah faced the same challenge relating to the language barrier: “Later on it got easier. Although at the beginning I could see that they did not understand many things I was trying to explain to them” (Jacob). Sarah expressed similar concerns about the situation:

I was teaching them about health, hygiene, brushing your teeth, and washing your hands. So in a way, I was teaching them those things but in English, so they did not fully understand and take it all in. Also, it was hard to fully communicate the message because of my incapability to communicate in their language. (Sarah)

Again, these quotes demonstrate that volunteers were struggling to perform their work based on a lack of the right skills. Pycroft (2016) points out that unskilled volunteers, when teaching languages, can make children's time fun but not necessarily beneficial. This was the case with Jacob and Sarah as well as with the other volunteers teaching English with the organization: "I don't think teaching them English was the most positive impact I personally made. Just to be with the kids, playing with them, and teaching personal hygiene is important" (Sarah).

I had similar feelings during my time there, which I expressed in my diary:

Am I actually bringing any skills in here apart from my fluent English as it is written on my CV and my good energy? Yes, I can give them love and I can give them my time and attention. I know little about children's psychology, I do not think I have ever taught a class full of kids before. Almost all the 'teachers' (volunteers) are not native English speakers. Almost half of them kept making mistakes whilst having a simple conversation with me. (personal diary)

This demonstrates that, in addition to a lack of local language skills, volunteers felt that they also lacked English skills to an extent, but even more than that, general skills and knowledge in dealing with children or teaching them. Volunteers were trying their best to pass on the knowledge, but it was hard to understand the impact on kids or know if they actually understood what we volunteers were saying, especially with some children not speaking English at all and thus not understanding volunteers.

The present organization and other voluntourism organizations advertise programs as an easy way to make a change and become an empowered volunteer, but do not equip volunteers with the understanding and the skills necessary to deal with difficulties or even just to do a good job (Butcher, 2003). In the case here, the volunteer group entered Bali's community for a short period of time, with little or no understanding of the locals' history, culture, or ways of life, teaching them English, and having little consideration towards their language (Wall & Mathieson, 2006).

In regard to teaching, the primary research also showed that most of the volunteers teaching English were concerned about the lack of consistency and organization in the teaching program. No structure or lesson plan was implemented, and volunteers were allowed to choose topics and teach whatever they wanted. This freedom volunteers had was mainly due to the fact that most of the volunteers teaching English were short-term, meaning that every two or three weeks teachers changed. Thus, children had various teachers – however, one should not forget that in order to truly learn a language, there is a need to follow a structure. In my personal diary I reflected on how shocked I was in regard to the lack of planning: "There was no structure. You can basically come and teach whatever you want." Other volunteers had similar viewpoints, such as Jacob, who said that "in terms of a program, it was not as well organized as it should be. I could teach anything that I want, they did not keep any record." Isaac also argued that, "I was not impressed with the lack of structure behind the teaching curriculum. It seemed that every volunteer could teach what they wanted and that there was no continuity to the lessons being provided."

The key question that emerges here is, if the main goal is to teach English to Balinese children, how do you monitor/understand whether it was reached or not?

It is important to keep track of children's progress and make sure that there is a systematic lesson plan, however, reality looks very different. Meanwhile, the children remain at the same level of English, learning about colors or body parts over and over again with different volunteers. Interviews with Isaac and Jacob illustrate volunteers' concerns about the lack of improvement in children's level of English:

A teacher may teach body parts and countries one week, and then the next week when the next teacher joins, they teach the same thing. I feel that there needed to be some sort of system where volunteers record what they have taught so lessons are not being repeated. (Isaac)

Jacob added that "If I am going to the class and teaching colors without knowing that they have learnt the colors already two weeks ago, they keep repeating that over and over again and lose their interest."

Furthermore, not only does the rotation of short-term volunteers create a lack of consistency and organization in teaching programs, but also do children get attached to their caregivers. Some volunteers, who were volunteering for a month, teared up when their program finished, showing how strong the attachment and bond was they have created with the children. Seeing this suggested that children may potentially feel the same about their teachers going away. This was also well-recorded in the literature, with Mustonen (2007), for example, arguing that short-term volunteering brings a great risk of leaving children vulnerable, creating certain trust issues, or even putting them at risk of mental problems.

Making a Lasting Change? Volunteers' Expectations Versus Realities

According to Simpson (2004), volunteer tourism programs aim to "combine hedonism of travelling with the altruism of developing work" (p. 681). Surprisingly, however, I observed that while some volunteers were really concerned about the contribution they were making (as discussed above), others were not interested in either making a change or personal development. They came to Bali just to get the certificate for volunteering because it was compulsory for their studies. Moreover, some argued that the reason for choosing Bali was because it was a great opportunity to complete voluntary work, but at the same time, an ideal holiday destination. Thus, many saw volunteering in the tropical island of Bali as a perfect escape from "boring voluntary work" as they described it. This relates closely to Mostafanezhad's (2013) research on volunteer tourism in Thailand, which showed that tourists picked Thailand particularly because it did not seem like a developing country (although it was) and was pleasant to live in, while most saw Africa, for example, as a destination for more experienced volunteers.

Part of the present research focused particularly on understanding volunteers' motivation to participate in the program versus their view of the impact they were making in the end. Interestingly, it emerged that most volunteers went on the program either to make a positive change, "spread goodwill" (Jacob) or to experience Bali from a different perspective, such as, for example, Sarah who

wanted to do something other than just sightseeing and the places that I went to in the first weeks of being in Bali were very touristy. I was seeing how all the tourists are kind of destroying their local culture and their communities. I did not want to contribute to the negative impacts I saw around me and I wanted to make a positive change.

This shows, again, that while volunteers are often driven by a desire to make a developmental impact, the holiday aspect is indeed important for them. It seems like volunteer tourism is still seen as a more sustainable and alternative form of tourism in consumers' eyes and that the humanitarian side comes second. When completing the program, volunteers mainly argued that although "it was a great time" (Sarah), many "believed [they] made a positive impact but not of the magnitude that [they] would have hoped" (Isaac). Of course, everybody wanted to make a positive change, however, the research overall showed that long-term volunteers (like Jacob and Ignacio) were more focused on volunteering and benefiting the local community, whilst short-term volunteers were more geared towards experiences and self-realization.

Moreover, none of the volunteers stated that the personal impact made was beneficial to local communities. The volunteering experience was truly 'life-changing' for many, contributing to self-realization and personal growth, but nobody felt like they were truly 'making a positive change' in local's lives, due to the reasons discussed above. The question that arises is whether it is possible at all to make a change within two weeks. Volunteer tourism organizations tend to spread the message that there are quick fixes for big social issues, reinforcing the idea that having good intentions is enough for change to happen overnight (Jesionka, 2015), and that the consumer has a role to play when it comes to sustainability and development. The SDGs feature a separate goal focusing on "sustainable consumption and production patterns" (Goal 12), demonstrating the increasing responsibility we carry as consumers and as tourists (UN, 2019). However, as the findings above have demonstrated, reality looks somewhat different. Maybe it is, indeed, the time to stop advertising these programs using phrases like 'make a sustainable impact,' 'play a crucial role,' or 'make a difference' – all of which feed the humanitarian gaze of tourists further, without effectively making them agents for sustainable development.

DISCUSSION: BALI'S VOLUNTEER TOURISTS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO THE SDGS

The insights discussed above have pointed towards a range of challenges when it comes to making volunteer tourists true agents of change and contributors to the SDGs. From the experiences discussed in this paper, it seems that volunteer tourism will have a tough time meeting the SDGs, particularly if it is of a commercial and short-term nature. While volunteers may have benefited from a pleasant time away from home, it became obvious that their feelings of being useless and redundant in the communities they visited became quite unsettling. Thus, this issue must become one of pressing concerns to the industry.

One would think that volunteer tourism would particularly contribute to quality education (Goal 4), and decent work and economic growth (Goal 8), but the volunteers in the current program had a range of doubts about any kind of positive impact

the program had. Key problems identified were a lack of skills, expectations that were set too high through marketing, and a lack of coordination, particularly when it came to making projects fit local needs. In addition, in its very nature, the kind of volunteering presented here is not in line with the “leave no one behind” tagline of the SDGs, and hence breaks its key inclusivity clause. The SDGs are meant to focus specifically on the poorest and most marginalized – however, the present research showed that tourists are generally from wealthier social backgrounds to afford their trip in the first place. Others have argued that volunteer tourism neither tends to include the marginalized in destination communities – while it may contribute to education, it does not benefit those that cannot even send their kids to school in the first place (Howard & Burns, 2015).

As a consequence, it seems that volunteer tourism in the present context does not contribute very well to any of the targets set out in this paper. Targets 4.1 to 4.6 (centering around the equal access to quality education and training) are hard to fulfill on volunteers’ side, given the inequality in who can access programs, but also on recipients’ side – mainly due to the lack of organizational coherence and true quality education. The problem with target 4.7 (ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development) seems to lie mainly in the lack of useful sustainable development learning on either side of the equation – although we can assume that volunteers do seem to have gained at least some degree of knowledge of global issues and problems pertinent to the Global South, in turn (hopefully) making them more critical life-long learners in the future. Target 4.C (increase the supply of qualified teachers in developing countries) is hardly applicable to the present program given the lack of local capacity building of teachers through, for example, train the trainers programs, fostering a dependency relationship rather than creating independence. Lastly, target 8.9 (devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products) partly applies here in that the present program does at least create jobs and economic benefit through volunteers travelling in the destination; however, how far these create true local empowerment is questionable. The authors assume a high percentage of leakage of the income the organization generates, as well as that very few jobs are locally created through the volunteer programs.

In the future, volunteer tourism can only meet the SDGs if it is in line with these local needs and values and, more importantly, if it recognizes the dissolving of binaries as propounded by the SDGs. The SDGs framework is characterized by the universality of the goals, which “may help to remind us that development can no longer be seen as a North to South process, and neither should volunteering” (Howard & Burns, 2015, p. 11). It means that there is an increasing need to recognize, “that there is poverty and marginalization within the richer nations as well as in the poorer ones, and that solutions are interconnected” (ibid, p. 14). This might lead the industry to de-colonize and co-create knowledge in volunteer tourism in order to, “unsettle this geography of volunteering and development other” (Laurie & Smith, 2017, p. 99), and create true reciprocal partnerships, as propounded by the SDGs (Lough, 2016), rather than encounters that are characterized by neo-colonial Othering.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has offered one of the first attempts in bridging the gap between volunteers' experiences, their felt impact, and the SDGs. It did so by conducting ethnographic research in a volunteer project teaching English at the Northern coast of Bali, based on both volunteers' responses and self-reflection by one of the authors. It created a discussion as to whether volunteer tourism is a viable instrument in line with Agenda 2030. Several obstacles were identified that keep voluntourism in the Balinese context from aligning more strongly with the SDGs, including a lack of skills and feelings of uselessness on volunteers' part, expectations that are set too high through marketing, as well as a lack of coordination and the fact that projects do not focus on the marginalized (in line with the SDGs "leave no one behind" tagline). Volunteers are regularly taking on the role of those that are expected, and indeed expecting, to make a long-lasting change through their actions; however, this paper showed that they are not empowered to do so with the right skill-sets and training, and that self-realization and leisure still remain at the top of their priorities, rather than a sustainable change in the destination.

With tourism overall having come to a complete halt this spring 2020, due to COVID-19, so too has volunteer tourism. Nevertheless, it is foreseen that this kind of travel is not going to vanish or disappear in the future. Although most companies have postponed their operations and trips to autumn 2020 for now, there are no indicators pointing towards a decline for volunteer tourism's future, particularly not of the bigger and hence economically more resilient companies. It is expected that with austerity and cutbacks in public spending, volunteer tourism will keep forming a key part of development intervention. More efforts are needed to make it a more sustainable form of tourism though, in line with the current SDGs, particularly if the bigger, more privately- and foreign-owned organizations that so often demonstrate a patchy record of positive impact, are the ones to survive this crisis. More clarity is particularly demanded when it comes to the SDGs setting out standards of what knowledge, for example, needs to be learned to achieve Goal 4, so that organizations can work on aligning their objectives more clearly with Agenda 2030 (Scheinert et al., 2019), or how they can use volunteers to create more capacity and jobs locally, to also contribute to Goal 8. Again, as with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and much of the past documented efforts on sustainable development (Sachs, 2005), it seems that one of the key challenges here is the translation of these goals to make them meaningful on the ground.

More research therefore need to focus on creating a clearer framework that shows how volunteer tourism organizations can and should be contributing towards specific goals and targets in the future – both to assist the industry in understanding how to clean up its patchy past of 'missed successes' but also in regards to enabling a more mutually beneficial experience both for tourists and residents alike. Given that the resident perspective lies beyond the scope of the present research, future research must focus specifically on understanding the SDGs from the point of view of those that are meant to be benefitting from tourism and humanitarian initiatives. In addition, the limited scope of this research and the micro-perspective it adopted, meant that it focused only on one specific organization and project. Future research

therefore could adopt a wider perspective, studying a plethora of organizations that operate in Bali or Indonesia at large, for example by matching actions on the ground clearly with the SDGs indicators set by the Indonesia Roadmap (see, Ministry of National Development Planning Indonesia, n.d.).

Overall, this research created one of the first discussions of voluntourism and the SDGs, creating hope that volunteer tourism *can* lead to true reciprocal partnerships, rather than encounters that are characterized by neo-colonial Othering. The universality of the SDGs can make an essential start in terms of challenging power imbalances and the idea of the ‘South’ as in need of outside help delivered by the volunteer as perceived agent of change – a discourse that has nurtured volunteer tourism for a long time. It is not only the marketing and photographic material that needs to represent a more realistic view of the Global South, but also the learning from locals’ existing knowledge as well as the co-creation of future capacity, which will make volunteer tourism a much more empowering and enabling endeavor, not just for those travelling but also for those living in the destination.



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