
Volunteering Abroad - Things to Know Before You Go

Is this you?

Your children have grown and fled the nest. You are graced with good health and energy and are comfortable with your profession and possessions. You are retired or in a position to take a significant amount of time away from work, and lately you have been thinking you want to stop taking and start giving and try and make a difference, somewhere, somehow, in the lives of those who have so much less. You are a member in good standing of the generation that was supposed to change the world for the better but so far has failed, and now the time has come to do something about it.

As you think about all of this, you conclude that maybe it's time to volunteer abroad.

.However, you have never spent much time in the developing world beyond a few enclaved vacations in some tropical hotspots and you have certainly not left Canada to immerse yourself as a worker in underdeveloped developing country. This profile paints a good picture of the state of mind in which we found ourselves in 2008 when we decided to spend three months of a planned year off volunteering in Africa. It was our first trip to the continent, our first time living in a foreign community and our first long-term volunteer experience anywhere. We learned a lot – about Africa, ourselves and each other.

In this article we distil what we learned before we left and, more importantly, what we discovered “on the ground” into some key questions that you might want to ask yourself as you consider volunteering abroad.

Knowing the international volunteer market

Before we jump into this - a few words on the volunteer “market” are in order. Happily, a quick scan suggests that there are plenty of opportunities for volunteering abroad. After all, the need is enormous, and many faith-based, eco-based, pandemic-fighting, educational organisations – from the conventional to the unusual – actively seek volunteers who are prepared to invest the time and commitment to serve in another country. A case in point in the “unusual” category caught our eye beside some kitchen renovation ads in a recent copy of the UK *Sunday Times*. Here we found one organisation offering volunteers the opportunity to

trek in Ethiopia's magnificent Sumerian Mountains while helping to "clear landmines and unexploded weapons from a recent zone of conflict."

With opportunities abounding, the first thing that might come as a surprise about volunteering abroad is that, in all likelihood, you will have to pay for it. No matter how magnanimous you might consider the donation of your hard-fought holiday time or the personal sacrifice of taking leave without pay, this will not compensate for the up-front fee that non-profits request. Most legitimate organisations charge fees to build their coffers to sustain programs, support their administration expenses and contribute to the sometimes considerable costs of volunteer training and management. If you find one that does not, consider this a warning signal and investigate.

Obviously demand for volunteering is high and, depending on the cause or country, you might find yourself in a "seller's market." You may be asked to organise a fundraiser before you leave home, which, from the organisation's perspective, this may not only be a good source of funds and a chance to extend its support network, but it might also test your personal commitment to the cause through your sweat equity rather than your chequebook.

You will also be asked to pay for your travel to the site and contribute to on-site living and accommodation costs as well – although many non-profits assist in making such arrangements through their networks at home and in the host country.

And now to the five key questions we think you should ask yourselves in considering a volunteering experience.

1. Why do you want to volunteer abroad?

The first, most fundamental question is a primary motivation check: Why do you want to do this? What is that deep-burning desire you are you hoping to satisfy? And how much are you prepared to sacrifice to meet it? These questions are both simple and profound, yet their answers will have a fundamental impact on shaping your volunteering opportunity.

Bringing clarity to purpose is an important aspect of volunteering, both for individuals and for organisations. A personal mission to "change the world" or "save Africa" may resonate deeply with you but is likely to set you up for frustrating disappointment. Many emotions drive our guilt-plagued generation. We realize that most of our contributions have been self-directed and that we are beginning to suffer from a serious bout of "affluenza." Many people feel they

have taken one too many self-indulgent holidays at all-inclusive resorts and can no longer avoid peering over the fence to see suffering unimaginable at home. Others are beginning to feel a slow and steady pang in the gut that calls out for finding a larger purpose in their lives. While these may describe strong and admirable conditions, they are not targeted motivations for volunteering.

For us, the answer was easy. We had supported our chosen charitable organisation from the day it was founded several years ago by a dear friend and now we wanted a chance to help “on the ground.” In the end, we were happy to have a simple but meaningful motivation to inspire us. But if we sought to go to Africa to fundamentally change our lives and those of others, we would still be searching.

2. What are your expectations?

The second group of questions are clearly linked to the first: What do you hope to achieve in your volunteer experience, both for yourself and for your volunteer organisation? What do you expect the outcome to be? What will you consider to be a “success”?

We went through a process of setting expectations at home that were steadily refined and levelled on the ground. Some volunteer assignments may be well structured with volunteer roles and expectations tightly defined from the outset – for example, build a house or waterworks, assist in a health centre, teach English as a second language. Others, however, can be much more open ended and free flowing, with the local situations defining general responsibilities with an over-arching mandate to help when and where the need arises. While opportunities in the latter category can be very inspirational to those who like to have their destinies in their own hands, the lack of defined goals and boundaries can be very frustrating – especially in a foreign environment.

Regardless of the operational setting, it is essential that you know what you hope to achieve in your volunteering opportunity. Moreover, it is important that you recognise this early and that you share it with your sponsoring organisation to ensure that there is a realistic and mutual “fit.” Then get ready to refine your goals as your experience unfolds.

In setting your expectations, much will depend on how much time you are prepared to commit. Expectations for a one- or two-week volunteering stint will, naturally, be different in scope than a three-month or one-year assignment. Some organisations will not accept volunteers for less than a defined time period. You might discover that the main results of

your volunteer experience may be no more than an opening of your eyes – something that might prompt more fundraising at home or a commitment to return for a longer stay in the future.

An expectation of making a real difference in the lives of a community or individuals will be elusive to measurement. After all, you are not likely to be delivering a “post-volunteer experience evaluation survey” to your “clients” in order to form an answer to this big question! That said, while we were suffering some personal angst over whether we had achieved anything on this score, we both received letters on the day we left from a young woman we had worked with who told us we had changed her life, so it can happen. You can have a big impact with what might be considered to be simple deeds, especially in communities where young people are often starved of attention from their parents – if, indeed, they have any.

It is important to remember that no matter how attached you might grow to the individuals and communities you are working with, from their perspective volunteers come and go. When setting your own goals, understand that your weeks or months of effort will be a small part of the larger work that your volunteer organisation is doing. You are part of a river’s flow. While your contribution is short-term, your organisation is there for the long run, and you are best served to set your expectations accordingly.

Changing the world, a country, a community, an individual are bold and ringing goals. Think of them as directions rather than destinations for your volunteer experience. In the end, small victories rather than monumental milestones are more easily achieved and more rewarding. I found helping to build a demonstration project for sustainable vegetable growing for grandmothers much more achievable than transforming local food production practices for an entire community over the course of a growing season.

3. How tolerant are you?

This is a complex question, and your answer to it will give you some important insights about yourself: How tolerant are you of cultures, religions and lifestyle practices that are fundamentally different from yours? How well do you adapt to strange and often primitive living conditions? How judgemental are you – can you see beyond the boundaries and lenses of your “First world” perspective and accept that there are other ways of doing things? How do you feel about being a visible minority in the community you will be working and living in?

Your first volunteer experience in the developing world will be full of challenges. Your capacity to tolerate differences will be tested at every turn and many of your own values will be tried to their core. As much as you might like to think you will quickly “blend in,” you are and will always be seen as “different,” “foreign” and “rich” no matter how long you stay. You may impress with your ability to learn the local language or some native songs and dances, but you do not live there. Perhaps you are not a tourist – but you are a visitor and, at some point, you can and will leave to go home.

If your perspective on international development is that the entire world is inexorably marching along a path to reaching Western standards of life and prosperity, get ready to encounter many cliffs and chasms on this particular road. You will experience some profoundly different conventions relating to religion, the family and gender roles for men and women that are often deeply ingrained in a culture that is possibly millennia older than yours. Taking these on by suggesting accepted Western ways of doing things may lead you smack into some very high walls.

We observed this several times in Western efforts to curb the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Southern Africa. Our “easy” solutions, so logical in the West, of promoting safe sex, abstinence or monogamy often find themselves wrecked on the shoals of deep-seated cultural and gender roles and values. In other words, it is not just the lack of condoms that is the problem; it is building acceptance that they should be used at all. On the other hand, we found that many local practices were often written off as being imbedded cultural differences. This often does disservice to the quest for legitimate change. Learning as much as you can about the culture of your host community before leaving home will better equip you to identify the real cultural barriers and those that may be less so.

We found ourselves initially to be quite judgemental, for example, on the matter of garbage strewn far and wide in our community. Surely the commonsensical dictates of hygiene and sanitation, not to mention aesthetic factors, made the case for the introduction of garbage collection and recycling schemes such as we have at home.. And would not this create jobs as well? When we discussed this with a local senior administrator, he said that his country was so desperate, so cash strapped, that it had to draw the line somewhere. Health and education were the ranking priorities. Garbage collection did not make the core affordability list, so it was left to individuals to take it on as best as they could.

Western governments often choose to reduce expenditures when facing fiscal crunches. Rarely, however, are they faced with eliminating programs of the magnitude of garbage collection. What such experiences taught us is that Westerners should be prepared to change their lenses and pause for reflection before leaping to hard-wired First World prescriptions on “what needs to be done” and how things can be fixed.

Finally, challenges imposed by local living conditions and lifestyles are probably the most universal tests of tolerance in any volunteering experience. Like us, you may have done your fair share of camping over the years which, though helping you cope with temporary hardships, was never considered a way of living. For three months, we lived in a remote community without electricity and the means for refrigerating food in a very hot climate. More importantly, as we were to find, we were without a dependable supply of water. The availability and choice of food in the local shanty shops in our village were both limited and undependable. Despite the overwhelming friendliness of the local people, we were housed in a building that was locked down at night behind grilled windows and barbed-wire fences and that was patrolled by a night watchman to protect us from anyone who might think nothing about robbing us – or worse. While we were warmly accepted into our community by its local leaders and tribal chiefs, we were universally advised not to go hiking alone in the magnificent natural surroundings without being accompanied by locals we could trust. We do not consider ourselves paranoid by nature, but, realistically, we recognised we were isolated and alone, the only “rich, white, foreigners” within 50 square kilometres. The cautionary reality of seeing ourselves as this highly visible minority and as possible targets of crime tested our tolerance to the extreme. Your tolerance to local living conditions must prepare you to cope at a much deeper level than anything you might have experienced before.

4. How well do you adapt?

Closely linked to questions of tolerance, the adaptability question is particularly important for older volunteers who, let’s face it, might have grown accustomed to leading pretty well programmed and structured lives by the time they have reached their fifties. How well will you adapt to being thrown into the deep end in a foreign environment? Can you adjust quickly to new surroundings? How well will you be able to respond in a crisis situation in a foreign environment? Are you prepared to shed your “safety blankets” and plunge into a new experience? Volunteering in the developing world requires you to operate well outside of your comfort zone. Equally, many of the most memorable experiences you might have will be

those where you take a leap of faith deep into a local culture, its traditions and rituals, music and dance, food and drink.

With neither our own mode of transport nor an inclination to drive the treacherous roads in our host country, we had to depend on local “taxi-vans” whose drivers, vehicular safety standards and passenger loads would not come close to meeting licensed safety standards at home. Yet we had little choice but to travel in these vehicles to get to the regional centre where we could stock up on food and drinking water. We were constantly reminded of the danger at hand as we passed the overturned and charred remains of taxi-vans at the sides of mountain roads. Nevertheless, many of our best memories of our host country are to be found in the many miles we travelled in these vehicles – the joy of camaraderie and scratchy conversation with our fellow passengers and the wonderful sing-along’s to the lively and full-throttle *mbaqanga* music blasting from the taxi-van sound systems.

With cooking and hygiene standards well below what we would consider “basic” at home, we experienced several occasions in communal settings where we were offered questionable food and drink and could not easily get away with saying, “No thanks, we just ate at home.” Fortunately, we were not served lizard parts or monkey brains (as far as we know!) and generally managed to pass this particular “gut check” often with the aid of Imodium.

We often thought about how we would react in a scenario where we were placed front and centre in a local crisis. How would we choose to intervene in a family conflict that violated our own principles, ethics and values? How would we, for example, assist a wife seeking shelter from an abusive husband or a child spurned by his extended family? What might be the local consequences of our actions given our isolation? Fortunately, we never faced such a situation – although we came awfully close. We were happy, however, to have posed these hypothetical questions, developed response plans and tested them with our volunteer organisation in the event we needed to act.

Clearly defined roles and responsibilities, established before you arrive, can help you adapt to your new, far-from-home work environment. However, on the ground, your defined working program will invariably yield to new and immediate priorities and you must be able to adapt – and quickly.

5. How well do you know your volunteer organisation?

This last question is often overlooked by volunteers. However, asking it now may save you many headaches later. So find out: How does your sponsoring non-profit operate, particularly on the ground? Does it partner with well-established, global organizations or does it a lone-wolf working in isolation? If the latter, how strong is its relationship with the local community? What is its track record for managing and supporting its volunteers? Is it clear on its mission, purpose and program objectives? What orientation does it provide before volunteers leave home and after they arrive on site?

You will need to go well beyond websites posted by volunteer organisations and your own perception of the organisation's presence in your own country, where its efforts are more likely focussed on fundraising and government liaison than on its on-site operations. Your organisation is not just your sponsor; it is your lifeline in a very foreign environment. Its record, reputation and integrity on the ground will hopefully be strong, but this is not always the case. Time invested in researching your organization well is among the most valuable time you can spend before you embark.

As you will likely be paying for your volunteer experience in a seller's market, rudimentary "buyer beware" caution is definitely in order. It is important to understand the roles, responsibilities and managerial capacity of your organisation and its working relationship between headquarters and operational staff. Many come to their volunteer experience through faith-based charities, which can bring an automatic bond and connection to purpose and mission. However, in other cases, you might chose an organisation from a scan of websites and promotional material or because it offers a competitive "price point of entry." Don't be fooled: not all non-profits are equal. If one is charging substantially less than others, this may not necessarily be a good deal for you. Take it, rather, as a warning that the organization might be poorly organised on the ground and running risks that would not be acceptable. Our 22-year-old son discovered this when a local leader in the organisation he was volunteering for in Africa was found to be absconding with funds targeted to housing volunteers on-site. Fortunately, our son's host family had received their funding, but many others had not, leaving volunteers without a job and without housing in a foreign country.

One of the best ways to assess how well your volunteer organisation will be able to support your efforts is to talk to former volunteers. Most charities are happy to provide "volunteer alumni" contacts for this purpose, knowing that it is in their best interest and yours, to get

you as well prepared as possible before you arrive. However, some choose not to provide these contacts, steering you instead to volunteer testimonials on their websites. This will not and cannot replace a conversation with someone who has been there. We spoke with several volunteer alumni of our organisation before we left and picked up all sorts of useful information, from advice on coping with inevitable volunteer frustrations to recommendations on “must-bring” items for our personal comfort and safety. (Our top three “must brings” are LED headlamps, high SPF suntan lotion and portable water filters – advice which we now happily pass on to all volunteer aspirants heading to Africa!)

The drafting of the work program for your assignment is another important test of your organisation’s capacity to manage and support volunteers. This can and should be an iterative process that allows both the volunteer and the organisation to align interests, skills and capacity in a mutually rewarding manner. In some cases, you may be “dropped into” an existing, repeatable program of activities that the organisation has delivered on site for months or years. In other cases, you may be asked to help start new programs or activities in more uncharted waters. Either way, you need to know how you will be supported.

Aspiring volunteers must recognize that managing volunteers can be a huge undertaking for resource-strapped non-profits, which, not surprisingly, often see it as a low priority that diverts scarce resources and energy from front-line programs and service delivery. In this context, charities are well justified in asking for volunteers to be “self starters” who can operate within organisational bounds with as little management as possible. This is a particularly important consideration when volunteers are posted some distance away from the organisation’s local offices, as can often be the case. You will be seen by locals as a representative of the organisation for which you are volunteering.

Spending sufficient time with your organisation before you leave and as soon as possible after your arrival on site will help answer the many personal questions and “*what ifs*” you may have in mind before you start. Accordingly, the scope and quality of a volunteer organisation’s orientation program will be an important test of its credibility and capacity to support you during your experience. In our case, we had a full-day orientation session with staff in Canada before we left, followed by half a day on site as soon as we arrived. These meetings were both excellent and invaluable, and we found ourselves going back to our notes many times during our three-month assignment.

Giving yourselves the best chance of success

Volunteering in the developing world can be a rewarding and life-changing experience, both in your personal and professional lives. But its rewards are best appreciated by those who come prepared to tackle the many challenges at hand. You may have the requisite vigour and passion to make a valuable contribution to the cause. But knowing your own boundaries and safety nets will help translate this energy into a truly rewarding experience. If you have asked and answered some hard questions about yourselves and your prospective volunteer organisation, you will be better equipped to operate outside of your comfort zones and your volunteer experience will be launched with a better chance of success by any measure.

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December 2009