



Doing Harm: When Helpers Contribute to the Chaos

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Abstract

Having worked with developing countries for over fifteen years, the author recognizes how good intentions can be lost when helpers do not fully comprehend the larger issues at play. In this time of "voluntourism," she cautions social workers to take actions based on thoughtful understanding of the entire situation.

Keywords: Service-learning, Voluntourism, Missions, Humanitarianism, Orphanage, Developing Countries, Volunteers

Introduction

When tragedy strikes a community, whether domestic or international, it is followed by an outpouring of support from persons with good intentions. Natural disasters, mass shootings or other large-scale events hurt the hearts of highly empathic people, such as social workers. We feel driven to do something to assist; and when we do good things for others, we feel better. What some call the "helper's high" is the release of endorphins that people experience from altruism [1]. I recall on September 11, 2001 that I waited in line for hours to donate blood, even though I lived thousands of miles away from the tragedies. I felt compelled to do something to try and help. I was not alone in my feelings, as research indicates 10% of all United States citizens volunteered to help in response to the September 11 attacks [2].

This desire to help those in need is a positive attribute of our profession; however, having worked with international organizations for fifteen years, I can see how good intentions are lost without viewing our actions through a global lens. For example, I visited an orphanage in a developing country that housed sixty young boys. Two women worked in the laundry area, hand washing all of the boys' clothing and bedding. It took them all day to wash everything, hang it on the line to dry, and then fold it, only to repeat that process again the next day. An American visitor to the orphanage felt badly for these women who worked so hard in the heat to provide clean clothing and linens for the children, so this visitor decided to purchase

them a washing machine. When I returned to the orphanage a year later to visit, the washing machine was sitting outside, rusting and in disrepair. When I walked into the laundry area, there was just one woman working. Her former colleague had lost her job, because they had the washing machine. However, that machine was not an industrial washer that can handle multiple large loads every day, and it had stopped working. They had no way to acquire parts or have it repaired, so they resorted to handwashing the clothes as they had previously. However, now they only had one set of hands. They were in a worse situation than they were prior to the altruism. This story illustrates how those of us in privileged situations fail to take into account the different culture, resources and environments of those we intend to help. The method we choose may be viable in our culture that has the infrastructure to support it, but it may be less effective or even harmful in other settings.

This can also be an issue when volunteers, who lack preparation or resources, flock to a disaster area to offer their assistance. These "disaster tourists" can quickly become liabilities to the relief efforts, as they hinder the work and drain already limited resources. There is always a need for individuals with certain skillsets; and when they partner with agencies that are organizing relief efforts, they can be valuable assets. However, a random team of unskilled volunteers who are unprepared for how they can contribute will simply deplete scarce resources. "Voluntourism," which combines international volunteer work with tourism, is gaining interest among young adults. Groups of young people often engage in mission work or short-term outreach trips in developing countries. They spend thousands of dollars to go "help" marginalized and disadvantaged people; however, teams of unskilled workers do not provide essential services and can even be an additional burden to those that do work in that community. Furthermore, they are often short-sighted and serve mostly self-interests [3]. They may be organized without a proper understanding of the community's culture, resources and needs. Even those teams that are skilled, such as health care teams, can be harmful if it "competes

against rather than compliments the host community's health system, which is often fragile and weak" [3]. Some scholars consider these teams to be "Band-aid solutions" [4] that do not create system change that will endure, but instead enable dependency on external assistance.

Those who cannot travel to provide assistance may decide that they will help by donating items they no longer need. At one orphanage in Jamaica, I sorted through dozens of boxes of donated clothing, with many of them being unusable. Heavy winter coats, adult sweaters, formal wear and dirty or damaged clothing could not be used by this orphanage, but they were taking up valuable storage space. Donations, such as these, take time away from other work, as staff and volunteers must sort through to find items they truly need. This also leaves the orphanage with the dilemma of how to dispose of these items. We have literally just transported our garbage to their country. When we donate items, we must consider whether they are actually solving a problem or whether they are creating one.

A primary source of income for the women in a community I visited in Ghana was sewing clothing. These seamstresses were finding competition from the mounds of cast-off clothing that was donated from countries, such as the United States. This clothing was fashionable, in terms of eastern standards, and was more economical than the traditional garb sewn by the local women. However, it is directly taking money away from the women who earn their livelihood sewing clothing. Economist Garth Frazier [5] posits that this is one factor in why some developing countries are not making economic strides. Even items that we donate to local thrift stores may not remain in the US, as they are often sold in bulk and shipped to developing countries. We may drive away after dropping off our unwanted clothes at our local Goodwill and feel a sense of satisfaction that we have helped others, when we may actually just be a spoke in the wheel that perpetuates global poverty.

Failure to understand the complex problems facing the people in developing countries, can actually damage their capacity for growth. I am not suggesting that we stop giving or volunteering. In fact, each year I take a group of social work students to Jamaica for service-learning. I make sure that each one of them understands that they are not going on the trip to "help" or "fix" anyone or anything, but they are going there so they can learn how to be a better social worker.

They are practicing their cultural communication skills, witnessing the effects of colonialism, gaining firsthand knowledge of global issues, and challenging their own biases or pre-conceived ideas. I remind them that they are not altruistic in going on this trip, but they are, somewhat selfishly, going to enhance their education. A student of mine once said during one of these trips that Americans should not be turning other people's tragedies into tourism, and he was absolutely right. This is the point to consider.

When I think back to September 11 and the hours I spent in line to donate blood, I did not help anyone. The place I was at closed before I was able to donate, because they were overwhelmed with donors and did not have the staff or supplies to handle the demand that day. I was not thinking about how my actions would affect those trying to engage in relief efforts. I was only aware of my own feelings of vulnerability and desire to take action. I was seeking to gain control in a situation that was out of control, and I was seeking the endorphins to ease my emotional pain. In retrospect, I should have waited a few more days before going to donate, when I would not simply be a drain on their resources. Instead, I was trying to silence my own inner struggle to cope with what was happening, and I simply added to the chaos of the day. I challenge all of us to reflect on whether we are inadvertently adding to the chaos before taking action.

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