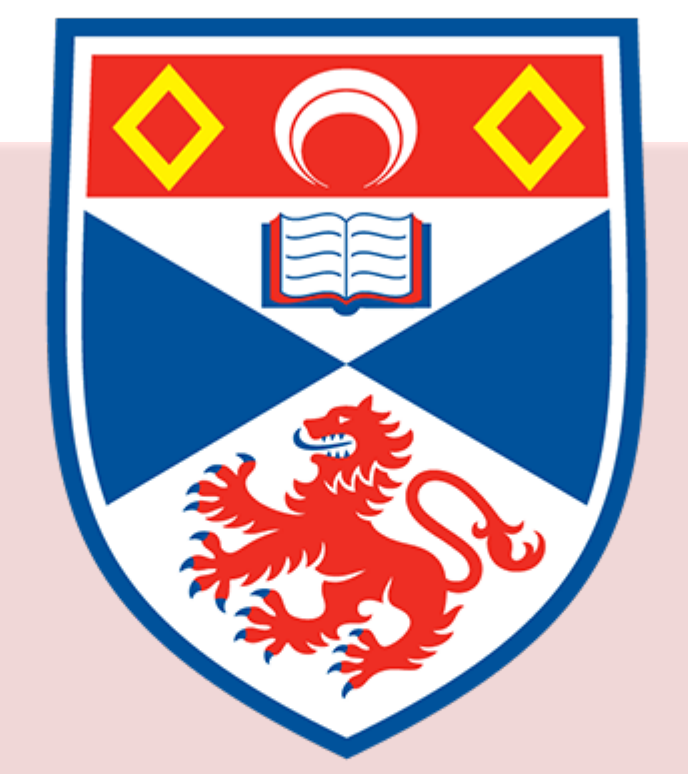


English-Language Voluntourism in Tanzania

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Introduction

The aim of my research is to investigate the benefits and risks of English-language voluntourism in Tanzania focusing specifically on the central questions: who truly benefits from English-language voluntourism in Tanzania, and do its benefits justify its risks?

English-language voluntourism is the practice in which socioeconomically privileged fluent English-speakers visit a foreign country as volunteers and “teach language lessons in the Global South on a short-term basis” (Jakubiak 2012: 437).

Methodology

- Autoethnography to reflect on my positionality.
- Semi-structured interviews conducted online via video conferencing software and text message conversations with voluntourism organizers and past volunteers.
- Literature from a range of disciplines including anthropology, sociology, political science, and tourism studies due to the interdisciplinary nature of volunteering and language-teaching.

Imagining Difference

Peter described our trip’s aim as “find[ing] out what can be learned from a different culture, different experience, different religion, different background, different life, compared to ours”. This centres the volunteers’ mobility and agency, while host communities are framed as “passive receptors of the volunteers’ transformative support” (Friedrich 2019: 37). Mudimbe’s work on the colonial invention of Africa also sheds light on how “the construction and maintenance of difference” which is evident in these constructions of Tanzania as “different”, “poor”, or “worse” avoid any self-contained description of the host community and allow ‘the West’ to define itself, and understand and represent Africa to fulfil its needs (Dogra 2014” 12-3). In this way, voluntourism “works to map out a geography of compassion that extends imperial legacies of colonialism and uneven development” (Mostafanezhad 2013: 332).

Corruption and Morality

Noah, who organizes school service trips to Tanzania, described an incident where a school where they volunteered did not receive books and computers due to the operator’s strict anti-corruption policy preventing them from paying a “fee” at the Tanzanian port to release the shipment. de Sardan (1999: 38-9) notes how gift-giving, or bribery from a Western perspective, is commonplace in much of Africa, exemplifying a clash of expectations between the altruistic volunteers and the reality in Tanzania. The volunteers selflessly give time and money which could be considered a “pure, disinterested gift”, but this gift asserts the differences between “the rich giver and the poor receiver” the host communities) in a “position of indebtedness and powerlessness” with Western morals imposed upon them, while the volunteers receive emotional validation as well as “self-realization” and an addition to their CVs (Stirrat & Henkel 1997: 69, 72).

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Who volunteers?

Cole (2012, para. 13) describes the White Saviour Industrial Complex as a phenomenon where “a nobody from America or Europe can go to Africa and become a godlike saviour or, at the very least, have his or her emotional needs satisfied”. However, Whiteness and Western origin are no longer the only qualifying factors for volunteers: Peter, who I spoke with regarding my volunteering trip said that we were “not about a bunch of well-meaning white Westerners... going off to see some poor people somewhere”, but while he sought to distance himself from white saviourism, his mention of “poor people” within host communities suggests that the volunteers are, by contrast, not “poor”. Perhaps, then, the Saviour Complex extends beyond race to include socioeconomic privilege in the context of voluntourism in Africa.



(Go Volunteer Africa n.d.)
(Conservation Travel Africa n.d.)



Similar to the celebrity images on the left, such images featuring a white volunteer alongside smiling black children are often used to advertise English-language voluntourism programmes.

Conclusions

- Volunteers are the primary beneficiaries of English-language voluntourism in Tanzania.
- This practice may indeed pose some risks to the communities.
- A consideration of the wider context, as well as changing the aims of voluntourism may help improve the practice.
- The question of whether the benefits of English-language voluntourism justify its risks would be best answered by members of the host communities who have experienced it first-hand.

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Priyanka Chopra (top image) and Prince Harry (bottom image) posing with African children are examples of the prevalence of savior complex in popular culture

Economics and Wealth

The “individual acts of compassion” which constitute volunteering continue to benefit volunteers in the form of a “useful addition to the curriculum vitae (CV)” that demonstrates their cultural awareness and initiative, and further consolidates their place of privilege in this economic system (Jakubiak 2016: 247; McGloin & Georgeou 2015: 403). However, an “interrogation of power relations and distribution of wealth”, or the hegemony of English, was noticeably “absent” in our approach to volunteering and English teaching (Deramo 2018: 11-13). Similarly, ELT voluntourism discourse seems to frame English as a “magical cure-all”, and reinforces certain ideas that “reflect neoliberal prerogatives”, placing “people in constant motion, people as competitors, people as individually responsible for all aspects of their lives”, and pushing certain ideals and values onto the host communities (Jakubiak 2012: 448).

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