

## **Student Volunteering in Developing Countries:**

### **Neo-Colonial or building a humanising global civil society?**

#### Abstract

It is now an increasingly common occurrence for students to spend time 'volunteering' in developing countries either before they enter HE, when they leave or during summer breaks. This is not without controversy and opinion is divided on the benefits of such experiences both for the student and for host organisations and communities.

The UK organisation Voluntary Service Overseas recently asserted that 'young people would be better off backpacking' rather than undertaking one of the myriad of short-term voluntourism experiences that have sprung up to meet increased demand. Others argue that student volunteering in this form is neo-colonialist and simply an exercise in CV embellishment.

There are now a considerable number of organisations (ranging from tiny charities to large private companies) who claim to offer the opportunity for students to 'help' people and organisations in developing countries. Yet practice is very mixed. At worst students pay excessive fees to companies who pass little or nothing to the communities they place students in. Additionally, students are ill-prepared and lack the skills and experiences to make a real contribution.

Yet- a period spent in a developing country can be transformational, it can build processes of cultural exchange and learning, and it can contribute (albeit in a small way) to reducing poverty.

This workshop draws on the experience of a small UK NGO (Village-to-Village) that facilitates student volunteering in Tanzania. It considers the preparation that students require to gain from their experience and the challenges of ensuring that the work done by students can make a contribution to local development efforts.

It also presents work being done to establish a Responsible Volunteering Association that audits organisations offering volunteer experiences to try and ensure that they have a positive and meaningful in host communities, and that students themselves are equipped with sufficient knowledge and skills to understand the context, ethics and challenge of their placement.