

Learning Service  
Guidelines #1

# Tips & tricks for learning before helping



A guide to finding a responsible  
volunteer placement

[learningservice.info](http://learningservice.info)



# Who is this for?



These tips are for anyone looking for a volunteer opportunity, whether for one day a week in your local community, or a full-time commitment in a far-off land. They were created to help you during the planning process to generate some of the questions you might want to ask both yourself and the project organizers of the placement or voluntary position you are interested in.

With this checklist, you can find a volunteer placement that is a good fit for both you and the organizations you are intending to support, so use it to help you do your research!



Note: If you are signed up to give your time or are already off on a volunteer project, check out the “Learning Service Charter” as it is designed to help people recognize ways they can adapt their expectations, attitudes, and actions towards creating the most positive impact.

# What is “Learning Service”?

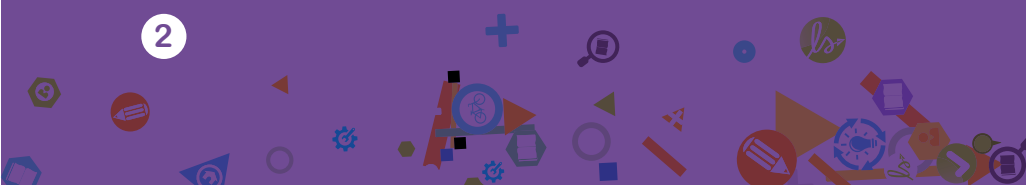


In many parts of the world, volunteering is now commonly referred to as “Service Learning”. This vocabulary shift marked a change in understanding about who was benefiting from the service of volunteers, and acknowledges that the “servers” themselves benefit from these projects, often more so than those they are “serving”.

“Voluntourism” is another term spun out of the growing number of tourism offerings combining travel with volunteer components. Both of these terms identify a “server” or “volunteer” who benefits by learning or having an interesting experience, but who is also here to help an implied “other”.

We think the world is ready for a new shift – from “Service Learning” to “Learning Service”. This not only acknowledges the learning component of service and volunteering, but embraces it as the most positive input and outcome of the exchange. The trend of encouraging **SERVICE** before we encourage **LEARNING** has led to many misguided actions and damaging results. So let’s bring **LEARNING** to the forefront and embrace the idea that before we can effectively “serve” or help, first we must learn.

In this way we are not only more likely to avoid having an ineffective or even harmful impact while volunteering, but can also become more informed and responsible change-makers.



# DISCLAIMER



Before you jump into the 10 tips for analyzing overseas volunteering opportunities, we hope you will consider these two things first:



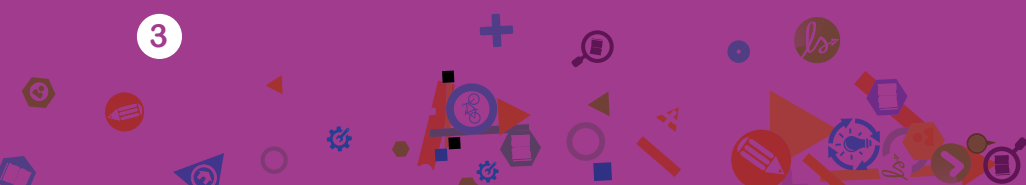
## A) Volunteering close to home:

If you give your time in the areas you know well, where you have the time to support longer-term needs, and where you can monitor and follow up on the impact of your service, you are likely to have great results.

## B) Taking a learning trip rather than a service one:

Before considering a volunteer vacation, make sure you have considered a learning one. There are many travel options for everyone from youth through to senior citizens which are focused on learning experiences. By learning before we serve, we are better able to understand the context of our actions and later pursue opportunities which are the best match for our skills and desired impact on the world.

If you are at the stage of identifying and vetting partner organizations where you plan to volunteer your time, then the next pages are for you! Here are 9 tips for analyzing if an organization might be a good fit for you and some questions to ask in order to learn more about the organization's impact.



# The Checklist for Placement Organizers and Volunteers:



One of the first – and most important – aspects of Learning Service is researching the organization where you are preparing to give your time. By doing this you not only make sure you spend your time with an organization that can benefit from your specific skill set, but also ensure you are supporting an organization whose projects, operations, and ethics you trust.

- 1 Assess the impact of the organization
- 2 Evaluate the management and transparency of the organization
- 3 Think about the sustainability of what the organization does
- 4 Ensure the direction and goals of the organization are locally driven
- 5 Check that the volunteers are not taking away local jobs or creating dependency
- 6 Question any organization diverting extensive resources towards catering to foreigners
- 7 Think about the impact of a foreigner doing that role
- 8 Question organizations that let unqualified and un-vetted volunteers work directly with children.
- 9 Question organizations that allow volunteers to do anything that they would not be qualified to do at home



## Assess the impact of the organization



Not all organizations were created equal. One of the most important aspects of choosing a volunteer placement anywhere in the world is linking up with an organization that is achieving great things. Don't just look at the activities they offer (e.g. training courses for disadvantaged women), look at the results of these activities (e.g. raised incomes for those women). There is a misguided belief that we should find service or volunteer placements with organizations that are struggling because they are perceived as being more in need. The reality is that volunteers should never be in the position to make the kinds of changes such organizations need.

If an organization is pointing in the wrong direction to begin with, you also probably do not want to help it take off. Watch out for organizations using the poverty of their beneficiaries to leverage increased support. Orphanages in tourist areas have been known to keep children in squalor to attract funding and volunteers. Spend the time to do your research and choose a great organization!

**To evaluate an organization's impact, you might consider asking these questions:**

### a) How do you define success for your organization?

Allowing the organization to define its measure of success will allow you to better understand its priorities and which impacts it is aiming to achieve.

### b) How do you measure success towards these goals?

You should be looking to understand what the organization is tracking and make sure you feel that those measurements are in line with the goals (i.e. tracking "number of schools built" is less in line with the goal of improving the quality of education than "student literacy rates")

### c) What failures have you experienced and what parts of your organization are you working to improve in the future?

An organization that is transparent about failures and willing to engage in a conversation around areas for improvement is more likely to be moving towards making said improvements.





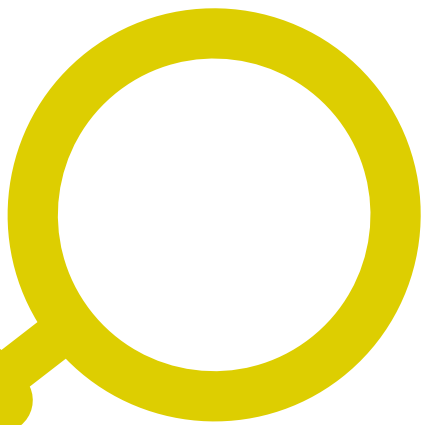
## 2

## Evaluate the management and transparency of the organization



The organization might be doing good things, but is it doing so in an accountable way? Responsible organizations can usually explain where their money comes from and goes to and can show you their audited statements. If an organization seems chaotic or unprofessional, appears in any way to be hiding information, is less than transparent, or has poor leadership, then you might not really know everything that you are supporting.

To check the transparency of an organization, you might want to ask:



a) Is it possible to see audited financial statements?

b) Can I get a receipt for my donation?

c) Do you have references, and information about donors and granting organizations?

d) What is the reputation of the organization within the local community? What is their reputation amongst other local organizations? (Don't just search on the internet or ask donors, as these sources are more removed from the intricacies and realities of the local impact.)



## Think about the sustainability of what the organization does.



Be cautious of organizations that offer handouts (in situations outside of humanitarian emergencies). Often, all such programs create is dependency, and although it has an instant feel-good factor it does not address the underlying problems (e.g. feeding street children does not get them off the streets). Understanding the long-term impacts of the project will help evaluate how effectively an organization is working towards its goals.

The following questions may guide you when considering sustainability:



### a) How are the “things” they invest in or donate affecting changes in human behavior?

In other words, when an organization defines its goals in terms of tangible “things” (number of wells dug, number of books handed out) make sure to ask about how it invests in people. Wells need to be maintained, repaired, and used properly. Having a book, especially if it is the wrong one or if there is no one to teach anyone how to read it, does not lead to increased literacy, academic achievement, or empowerment. Ask about how beneficiaries are identified and trained, as well as how the project is monitored.

### b) Is this a band-aid solution, or are underlying causes being addressed?

Band-aids are sometimes needed in the short-term, but organizations focusing on systematic long-term change need to be addressing the root causes of problems. For example, if an organization is working with orphans, abused children, or trafficked women, how does it think the number of these groups will change in the future? Is the organization working to bring those numbers down through their own activities or through partnerships? Alternatively, do they at least understand how other forces are already doing so?





## Ensure the direction and goals of the organization are locally driven



Look at who is defining what need is being addressed and who is defining what the response to that need should be. Agendas should not be imposed by organizational leaders unfamiliar with the local community, their specific needs, and their culture. If an organization operates without active participation from the areas they are “serving” then you should ask questions to understand whose interests are being prioritized.

The following questions may help you to ascertain how the organization is run:

a) Who owns the organization and how is it registered?

b) What are the decision-making lines and processes?

c) Can you meet someone with a management role?

The director is likely to control the culture, ethics, decision making, and salaries across the organization.

d) What role do the beneficiaries play in identifying the need for the project, and how are they involved in planning





## Check that the volunteers are not taking away local jobs or creating dependency



Consider asking the following questions:

- a) Is a volunteer the best person to fill this role?
- b) Who will take on these tasks when you leave?
- c) Will your input leave the organization with a continuing dependency on volunteers, or with a greater capacity to solve similar problems internally in the future?

Volunteers are not “free”. Despite the fact that volunteers do not get paid, hidden costs (such as supervising the volunteer or even communicating and arranging the placement) may be higher than paying a local person to do the job the volunteer has been assigned to. Even if it does not work out to be cheaper to pay someone, you need to consider the quality of the work as well. A poor paint job may have to be re-done.

An institution relying on a series of short-term, sporadic, untrained volunteer English teachers may get higher quality and consistency from hiring a local teacher. To avoid this, think about volunteering in a way which enables long-term staff to do their jobs more effectively.

For example, think about the difference in impact between a volunteer teaching English directly to students and a volunteer teaching English to local English teachers. One way creates a need that has to be constantly filled, the other builds the capacity of the existing system.





## Question any organization diverting extensive resources towards catering to foreigners



Ensure that the presence of volunteers is furthering the mission of the organization instead of redirecting or draining resources. At worst, you might unintentionally support the 'poverty tourism' industry or line the pockets of corrupt businessmen or unethical volunteer placement companies. Make sure that you are making a donation of your time and money that is at least as valuable as the resources you are taking from the organization.

Questions you can ask yourself include:

- a) Whose needs are being served best in this organization?
- b) What are the motives for this organization to take volunteers?
- c) Will providing the necessary supervision or support for volunteers distract staff from the main mission of their organization?
- d) Are paid staff taking time out to instruct the volunteers?
- e) Should you compensate the organization for their managerial time or find a placement where you are able to add value without as much management support?
- f) Is the volunteering opportunity being primarily created for you to provide profit for a company or wealth for an individual?



Think about the social impact of a foreigner doing the role you are being offered



Questions you can ask include:

- a) Are volunteers' roles designed to reinforce the roles of local staff?
- b) Will the volunteer be managed and supervised by a permanent member of staff or the other way round?
- c) Is the ability to speak English fluently taking precedence over other, more important, skills?

Organizations may accord high status to a foreign volunteer: prioritizing their needs over the needs of other staff, or taking their word over more experienced local employees. This can cause the wrong decisions to be made or power structures to be shifted.

Question organizations that seem to let volunteers make too many or too big decisions about what the organization does. Volunteers should be primarily contributors and learners, not managers. Ensure that you reinforce the value and status of permanent staff rather than undermine them.



## Question organizations that let unqualified and un-vetted volunteers work directly with children



In countries with strictly enforced child protection policies, you need to undergo a series of checks and extensive training before you are allowed to work with children. Why should children in other countries be treated any differently? Even qualified volunteers should be wary of short-term care-giver roles, as these can be extremely emotionally disruptive to vulnerable children.

Coming into an educational institution for a short time to play with children, or even teach songs or disconnected lessons, is often more of a hindrance to their learning than a benefit.

Be wary of supporting organizations which allow un-vetted and unqualified volunteers to interact with children, especially for short periods of time.

Questions to ask include:

- a) Would this be allowed in your country?
- b) What kinds of background checks does the organization do on the volunteers?
- c) What kinds of qualifications would be necessary to fulfill this role in your



Question organizations that allow volunteers to do anything that they would not be qualified to do at home



Questions you can ask include:

a) Would you be allowed to do this job at home?

b) Would the organization put a local person with the same skills in the role they are offering you? If not, why are they offering it to you?

If you have no background in teaching, building, or conservation, imagine the challenges of suddenly being put in the role of teacher, builder, or conservationist, especially in a completely new environment.

Be aware of the dangers of international volunteers using developing countries as a place to learn and experiment. If you have skills in a particular area, by all means offer them! However if you are looking to build your skills, ensure that you will be volunteering in an assistant role, and not one where you will be given sole responsibilities for tasks you are not qualified to complete.

If the sole purpose of your placement is to improve a certain skill, consider paying for an opportunity explicitly designed for learning. Remember: we have to learn before we can help!





## And finally...



The adventure doesn't end when you get home. Your volunteer experience is just the beginning! Remember what you've learned, be inspired by the things you've seen, and use this to ensure you 'are the change you want to see in the world'. Talk about your experiences and what they've taught you, seek out opportunities to advocate, educate, and fundraise, and encourage others to go out into the world and do some learning of their own!



If you do decide to get involved in a Learning Service opportunity, you might want to also take a look at the “Learning Service Charter” by PEPY Tours, as it provides tips for how you can both get the



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PEPY Tours is a different kind of travel company. Fueled by the belief that travel should be fun, educational, and beneficial to local communities, they create travel experiences that integrate sightseeing and cultural immersion with learning opportunities and off-the-beaten-track adventures, all the while raising money to support community development initiatives in the countries in which we travel.

An integral part of its mission is encouraging participants to live, travel, and give more responsibly, as well as realize their potential to be the change they want to see in the world. PEPY Tours believes that before we can make changes in our communities, countries, or indeed the world, we must first make those changes in ourselves. That is why all PEPY Tours trips blend personal development with lessons, discussions, and explorations of foreign aid, responsible travel, and global citizenship.