

7 Red Flags: Tips for International Volunteering

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All of us have the potential to contribute meaningfully to relieving suffering in the world and improving the quality of life for all. Our desire to do good in the world has given rise to an enormous marketplace populated with organizations geared to provide both direct and indirect service to address many of these big, hairy problems. However, volunteers beware! Not all organizations necessarily have the best interest in mind for the communities they purport to serve. Here are seven red flags to look watch out for when planning to volunteer abroad.

1

They promise big changes in a short amount of time.

The bottom line is, it's difficult to work across cultures, so if an organization is saying you'll be able to change the world in a week or a month, they're probably unfamiliar with real development partnerships or they're just trying to get sales.

They don't pass the "90 Second Rule".

The "90 Second Rule", developed by Ruth Taylor, says that if an organization promises you the chance to work with children, before you've had a background check or they know anything about you, they're not putting the children's best interests first.

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Beware of organizations that glorify the contributions of western volunteers in images and words.

Humility is an essential value for organizations that seek to work collaboratively with local communities to address pressing issues. Knowledge of local people is valued and essential in identifying and implementing projects and goals. They are partners in solutions. If the organization you're looking to get involved with overly relies on language or images that portray volunteers as "saviors" or focuses on what volunteers do **to or for** instead of **with** people, do more research.

Meaningful stories about impact and outcomes are absent.

It's easy to show up, paint a building, plant a school and leave. But meaningful partnerships involve outcomes that are community-driven. A reputable organization should be present in the community and work alongside its members.

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They don't share where their funds go or who benefits.

The cheap option is the easiest option, but it's not necessarily the most beneficial. If an organization isn't open about where their funds go or who benefits from them, it's difficult to get a real sense of their commitment to the communities they exist to serve.

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Child Safety Movement
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They offer opportunities to work with children in orphanages.

If an organization offers opportunities to work with children in orphanages, they may be more interested in sales than in the wellbeing of the children.

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They imply medical experience for medical school applications.

It is possible to volunteer in health education and outreach, but implying medical or clinical experience shouldn't be offered to people without a license.

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