

# Wanna go abroad, learn, help and explore?

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Last fall, I was invited to an event called *Go Global*, a mix of workshops and project presentations about global health, which took place in Montreal. As the vice-president of external affairs of IFMSA-Québec, I was asked to spread awareness about our organisation to the medical students in attendance. I was also eager to learn more about Médecins Sans Frontières, the programs of universities from all across the globe, and the work of dozens of NGOs who were all part of the fair. The event, however, was free and I wondered: where did the money to host this event come from?

I noticed that many booths were well set up, and had great promotional material that would attract anyone looking to experience something exotic. Seeing those programs for developing countries looking in such attractive ways on advertisement immediately struck me as somewhat contradictory. Most of the attending crowd were university-level students close to graduation and students who wanted to feel like they would be making a difference in the world.

It has now become a standard of practice for medical students to do an immersion program in a low-resource setting during their university studies. Although there are lots of underprivileged areas and populations close to home, the project is assumed to look more attractive if it takes place in developing regions such as Central America or Africa. Expectations from employers and admissions offices have grown accustomed to this component in an applicant's résumé, and it is not uncommon for students to think that choosing not to go abroad plays against them. This movement has evolved over the past years with more and more students trying to make their CVs more competitive by opting to do "humanitarian work" for 3 weeks. As with many aspects of modern life, the inherent "market sense" of many organisations has capitalized on this trend and begun to offer volunteering spots to fill this niche, completely circumventing the notion of humanitarian aid by reaching out to willing "customers". I would define humanitarian aid as the material and/or logistical support to a country, region or community in a catastrophic situation or following a crisis. Unfortunately, actions of our current generation of young university students, whether intentionally or not, have led to the development of a market for the neologism *voluntourism*, or travelling that comprises some level of "volunteer" work.

## VOLUNTOURISM

*Go Global* was in fact a demand-driven event, having partnership with many different universities across the country. I sensed a certain naive energy amongst the masses of interested students as they were wooed by the spokespeople of the various organisations who themselves were probably trained in marketing and finances rather than in social work, public health or international politics. I quickly realised that a lot of them were really offering *voluntourism* experiences rather than real community work. Their

marketing strategy was often based on photos showing white students with African kids around them. The different "volunteering opportunities" that were advertised were mainly all-inclusive packages from housing to boarding to social program cost, often even including what was presented as an automatic donation to the local community's partnering. The length of the programs could range from 2 weeks to 4 months and the range of volunteering offered went from teaching surfing to South African kids to working in orphanages in Vietnam.

*Voluntourism* is a newly emerging travel option that allows medical students to travel and volunteer in a community. It is, bluntly put, a way to travel and not feel guilty about the \$2000 spent on a plane ticket simply because you also do it to entertain a couple of kids, albeit for a little less. Adding fuel to the misplaced fire, this activity is encouraged by peers and gives an individual a certain chip to their social status. This phenomenon is even more present nowadays through use of social media platforms like *Facebook*.

## WHY SHOULD WE CARE?

The driving force of our desire as students to go abroad is ultimately to make a positive impact on the world. We want to help, but we must also be patient. The number one reason why it should be unrealistic for students to go abroad volunteering is because at this level of our education we do not yet have enough training to really provide humanitarian aid. We need experience in our field and in our own backyard in order to go and actually be able to accomplish what we aspire to do. You can't build a house in Togo if you have never built one in your country. It is naive to think "that it is better than nothing". It is all right to go abroad, wanting to explore other cultures, other languages and travel, but we must do so as a learner, not as a teacher/expert/worker. We must respect the process time it takes to truly grow into our roles as medical professionals and global health leaders.

There is nothing wrong with having good intentions and looking for an opportunity to help. However, one has to look into other avenues for growth before fieldwork. There are so many platforms for students, such as interest groups, simulations and conferences at local universities that effectively talk about the issues you would encounter in low-resource communities. This should be the first step in educating yourself in order to be able give back to those communities afterwards. You must be aware of the players on the field in order to effectively strategise and synergise in a team, which is at the core of effective humanitarian aid. It's also about balancing resources and making priorities. Your true ability to contribute to the humanitarian aid of a community should be weighed against the \$2000 you are spending on your plane ticket. Think about it: would that money be better spent on your ticket, or on directly providing resources or support to the local community?

## CHOOSING A PLACEMENT OPTION?

When you are doing a placement with an organisation, be it an internship, an exchange, or any project, you always have to make sure that you are making the right choice. Here is a quick list of the aspects you should be wary of when dealing with any volunteering organisation:

- Marketing using people contrasting ethnic groups;
- Marketing using kids;
- Non-disclosed budget or unclear description of where the money you are paying is going;
- Tailor-made programs that are personalised to you, your interests and your availabilities. This structure often implies that there are few standards actively being put in place on the community side to manage volunteers. It also shows how companies prefer to maintain the strength of their products rather than focusing on community coordination and adapting to its needs;
- Promotion of the touristic component of a hosting community as core to the experience: safaris, food and parties. These can be considered upon planning the trip once the organisation has been chosen;
- Showing that most of the decision process is done from your own country with moderate input from the field workers assessing the needs (if applicable);
- No local partnerships with community-based organisations;
- Lack of pre-departure training or a pre-departure training that only covers simple logistics. Ideally, they should include cultural competency and ethical considerations;
- Tasks listed represent occidental values and don't take into account the community needs from the community perspective.

Unfortunately, demand-driven organisations usually reinforce the common misconception before going abroad that the student's "good will" is automatically going to translate into something significant to the community. Since students usually look to the organisation as a reflection of the worth of their actions, this misconception continues to be propagated by organisations who have bought into the marketing phenomenon of *voluntourism*. We must objectively judge the impact of our actions will have on a community. Think before you act. It is essential before leaving to have proper pre-departure training that reduces expectations and sets realistic results. This training should always account for the fact that sometimes our presence might be doing more harm to the community on the long term, than the good we see we have done with our eyes while there. The most important part of providing humanitarian aid is to provide support in the eyes of the local community, and it is our responsibility as responsible citizens of the global village to insure that our actions and our intentions are aligned.

## FIRST, DO NO HARM

We are at an age where we want to experience different things and have a lot of time in the summer breaks to go abroad for significant periods of time. It is great to go with the intention to learn and get exposed to realities different to our own. My intention is not to discourage you from exploring different parts of yourself, but to do so with a bit of integrity. We must act from the stage of life that we are in. The reality is that we, as medical students, are too inexperienced to make the changes we aspire to. Attempting to do so now, when we are not ready, is actually what will lead to us becoming jaded in the long run. With the expertise and financial resources that come with experience, we will be able to build stronger bilateral partnerships and better tackle particular issues in a sustainable, ethical and culturally sensitive way.

I hope the future will have a lot of dedicated professionals who are able to see that education and prevention should come before intervention when trying to solve a problem. Medical school is our time to learn, to foster our interests and to explore different perspectives. Do it now while you have the opportunity and be humble about it. Don't expect to change others — they will most likely change you. I'll finish by using an inspirational quote from Mr. Jackson Brown: "Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbour. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover." I would add "do so in a wise and conscientious way".

## REFERENCES

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