

What You Didn't Know About Volunteering

Tam Wai Jia

How to volunteer without getting hurt and becoming jaded.

Our car-hunt in Africa began as soon as my husband and I touched down.

In a place which required us to travel hundreds of kilometres to villages regularly, and where public transport was at best, inconsistent, this was a much anticipated affair.

Our first potential seller was an English lady, with a lovely 18-year-old Toyota Rav-4 to sell. When asked why she was selling it, her reply was unabashed: "I was supposed to stay for a year. Leaving early because I've had enough. It's not like I didn't try. The car's great though."

Not the happiest thing to hear for newbie volunteers.

A teacher, she had come to Uganda on a one-year volunteer stint to develop curricula in schools.

"The system here is broken. I tried to fix it and it didn't work," she said.

Together with an expatriate and local team, she had tried to develop a teaching programme to transform the teaching culture.

"The people I worked with didn't get it," she explained.

With dreams of exciting partnerships and heartfelt collaborations, she was shocked to find teachers leaving the industry to become bricklayers, so they could earn more.

"No matter what I did, it was never enough. It was like trying to save a sinking ship."

There we were, at the beginning of our own one-year stint, listening to her sharing all of this.

And in our seven months here since, we've heard more stories of volunteers headed home jaded, bitter and hurt.

Is it inevitable?

I'd like to give my take on these three things that she said.

'The system here is broken. I tried to fix it and it didn't work.'

When my husband, Cliff, and I first arrived in Uganda, what struck us was how quickly things broke down.

Water and power cuts are common, our fan broke, the water heater took 10 days to fix, and it was our first time seeing our car key break in half. Coming from clean and sanitized Singapore, this spelt "cross-cultural shock" in capital letters for us.

As I navigated my role as a medical doctor here, I began to see, too, how the state of natural things reflected a broken healthcare, social and financial system, a result of years of a cruel history which had ravaged the country.

But that's why we were here: a broken system is exactly what needs the most help.

We accepted that it was not our job to fix the broken system. That liberated us from disappointment and unmet expectations.

Instead, we could focus on building friendships with the locals, understanding their needs, and problem-solving with them, together.

Empowering people, training leaders and restoring dignity requires not a saviour-mentality from volunteers, but a willingness to befriend and journey with them.

'The people I worked with didn't get it.'

In my first two months here, I got very little done in terms of my contributions to developing a training curriculum for healthcare workers at a HIV Centre.

Deep inside, my pride had been wounded. I blamed the slow progress on unreturned emails and tardy replies from other people.

As time went by, I realised that it was I, not other people, who was "not getting it".

People in developing countries are often intensely relational. Things move when people meet over a cup of tea and a samosa. What I had done was apply my familiar work ethic from an email-centric culture into a culture which valued face-to-face interactions and relationships.

Once I let go of my obsession with email replies, and started dropping into people's offices to say "oli otya?" (how are you), work progressed at a far faster rate. People had great ideas to share with enthusiasm and rigour, just not over a bland, typed interface.

It's up to us to find out what ticks in a different culture. Building genuine friendships with locals expedites this process.

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Volunteers are often people full of passion and big dreams to change the world. When those plans don't work out within our time frame, it can seem like all our efforts are pointless.

After all, the odds are often against us - corruption, poor infrastructure and a lack of security are just a few of the hurdles we face.

My husband, along with some local pastors, started up sewing, craft, soap-making and rabbit-farming livelihood projects, but there always seems to be more villagers to help.

For me, it often seems an uphill task to take my training curricula to a multitude of healthcare workers.

But we know that no matter how little we think we are achieving, it can mean much to another person.

Numbers are not everything. One life affected can mean a future transformed for an entire family, which can have ripple effects for a whole community.

When we hear stories of how weekly sewing lessons have helped a lady gain dignity and strength, and empowered her to take small steps to do more for her community, that is enough for us.

Systems, people and mindsets often take a long time to evolve.

But I think the journey itself, especially journeying with people, can be meaningful and immensely rewarding.

With some adjustment of expectations, I think volunteers can feel fulfilled and joyful, and not leave broken and dispirited.

Illustration by Debasmita Dasgupta, whose work is inspired by simple but special experiences in her life, with an emphasis on positivity. You can see more of her work [here](#).

About the Author

Despite her determination to stay single and become a micro surgeon, Wai Jia became a full-time missionary wife in Uganda. Always trying to multitask, the Singaporean doctor often finds herself writing, reading, and working on her next public health project, while baking something in the oven. She loves writing about life lessons she's learnt, in the hopes of inspiring young people.

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