



# Voluntourism in Sub-Saharan Africa is Expiation by the West, but Only Creates Further Dependency on the West

ESSAY

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## ABSTRACT

The political, economic, and moral implications of the international industry of voluntourism in Sub-Saharan Africa must be investigated as the sector continues to grow exponentially in Western popularity. This research critically investigates the extent to which the operationalisation of voluntourism is complicit as a form of normalised neo-colonialism and has been disguised as Western aid, then resultantly forced upon African communities. The essay uses a historical overview of the progression from colonialism and missionaries to the expansion of voluntourism to scrutinise the design of voluntourism. Intertwined through this overview is a post-colonial assessment of this instance of gatekeeping African development as a form othering alongside a Wallersteinian world systems investigation of the profit-making industry. The research argues that rather than being a sustainable form of international development in Africa, voluntourism allows the West to believe that they are helping and making reparations to Africa. In actuality, it is an industry that has become integral to Western self-development as a stepping-stone in Western adolescence as this normalisation of tourism in African poverty is seen as a pure and good deed. This essay evaluates the impact of the rhetoric that voluntourism transcends internationally and domestically in both regions, from continuing an international unequal relationship between the two regions as the West profits from Africa's poverty, whilst domestically in the West it continues symbolic and structural racism and domestically within Africa, the White Saviour and domination of Eurocentric epistemology restricts African youths' right to their own development pathways.

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## KEYWORDS:

voluntourism; Africa;  
decolonisation; development;  
neo-colonialism

## TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Remers, I. (2022). Voluntourism in Sub-Saharan Africa is Expiation by the West, but Only Creates Further Dependency on the West. *Glocality*, 5(1): 2, pp. 1–17. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/glo.50>

From colonising missionaries (Vrasti and Montsion 2014) to the institutionalisation and increasing popularity of the voluntourism experience (Schech 2017; Vrasti and Montsion 2014; Wearing 2001); there can be little denial of the West's intrusion as 'help' to Africa. This 'help', explored specifically in this essay as Western "voluntourism," has been argued to cause increasing damage to the development of Sub-Saharan Africa (hereafter SSA), despite its intention to aid the region (Freidus 2017). This essay will contend that both the idea and practice of voluntourism (also known as volunteerism and volunteer tourism) in SSA are symbolic attempts at expiation by the West; they act as a guise for continued Western profiteering and subordination of SSA. It is the design of voluntourism to be a short-term, unsustainable and, critically, Western-led sector that causes its attempt to make amends for previous wrongdoings to be contaminated with economic exploitation and state-led *othering* of Africans (Said 1978), as they remain both structurally and socially condemned to the periphery of their own development through the voluntourism process. Thus, short-term voluntourism is the systemic exploitation of African impoverishment which enforces *African* dependence on the West. It continues the damaging rhetoric that Africa needs saved by the West. At the same time the idea of voluntourism is presented as a *gift* of aid from the West to SSA.

This exploration of voluntourism is structured through the following discussions: Beginning with a personal recollection of volunteering in Zambia, this will introduce some of the complexities surrounding the reasons for, and repercussions of, combining volunteering and tourism in SSA. Secondly, there will be an analysis of the development of voluntourism through a historical lens and an evaluation of the current state of the voluntourism industry. It will then be argued that – having developed from a history of Western intervention – the design of Western voluntourism means it is ineffective in practically solving *African* problems. It will then be discussed how the idea of voluntourism is justified by the West as helpful and therefore seen as legitimate and forced on SSA, despite voluntourism as an industry that exploits Africa for its own benefits. Following this analysis of the financial implications of the business of voluntourism, the extent to which the West continues to force this industry on Africa will then be discussed through the rhetoric and power relations that are a result of voluntourism. Finally, the extent to which voluntourism causes damaging internal implications will be discussed to evaluate whether voluntourism increases dependency despite it being perceived by the West as a good thing to do.

## CRITICAL ASSUMPTIONS

First, this opening section will outline key concepts and explain important boundaries through which this essay will develop. It must be admitted that the viewpoint of this essay originates from a Western university-educated student who has been fortunate enough to engage in voluntary work with an NGO in Zambia. This experience will be explained to give a personal insight and demonstrate the writer's positionality on this topic. In terms of objectivity, due to the writer's background and experience, this is a Western interpretation of voluntourism, so whilst this essay will highlight the need for African voices on voluntourism in Africa, the essay itself perpetuates a Western discussion on this matter.

There are many different understandings of the differences between voluntourism and volunteering for development. "[Voluntourism is when tourists] volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society or environment" (Wearing 2001, 1). Callanan and Thomas see voluntourism as "shallow" projects focused upon aims, priorities and interests of the volunteer (2005, 195–99), whereas they see volunteering for development (VfD) as "deep" volunteering and focused on the local community (ibid.; Schech 2017). In VfD, volunteers impact communities through skilled volunteer experiences that support, rather than hinder, local opportunities (Schech 2017). VfD is also seen as sustainable as "long-term volunteer participation can engage local communities in beneficial ways" (Morrissey 2022, 3; Zahra and McGehee 2013; Schech 2017). In short, "Voluntourism gives equal weight to both volunteering, on the one hand, and travel and tourism, on the other hand" (Strohmeier and Heleta 2020, 1).

Although voluntourism occurs around the world, this essay specifically focuses upon voluntourism in SSA as the industry is seen as ubiquitous within the region (Freidus 2017, 1307), as the most popular destination for voluntourism (Hartman, Paris, and Blache-Cohen 2012, 157). Throughout this essay, African relations and peoples will be discussed in terms of a generalised SSA (SSA & Africa will be used interchangeably); however, this does not discount the immense differences of peoples and their experiences across the vast variety of SSA states, nor the agency of these groups. Having explained underlying assumptions of this essay, voluntourism will be evaluated through historical lens, and then further inspected through an examination of the design of voluntourism.

## **“I’M NOT GOING TO HELP YOU PAY FOR YOUR HOLIDAY” – A PERSONAL CASE STUDY**

Before travelling for my volunteer trip to Zambia, I had been challenged when I invited my peers to my fundraising event for the trip, as one of my peers replied, “I’m not helping you to pay for a holiday!” During my two-month trip to Lusaka, I spent my time volunteering with coaches and sport organisers from a Zambian sport-for-development NGO. We were instructed that as qualified sports coaches in the UK we were to work across selected communities to upskill and collaborate with existing volunteer coaches, teachers, and sports organisers to support their coach development. We were repeatedly told by our project managers that we were not there to coach, but rather to support to ensure the local-derived sustainability of these community sports projects. A key focus across all sports sites was to help the coaches in training youth coaches, especially girls, to ensure long-term stability and progress in these sport sites. The overall Zambia NGO and UK university coalition project has developed over decades to ensure it is sustainable, appropriate, and reflective of changing local needs and desires of the NGO and community. The project has a central aim of ensuring local-led sports development for young people, especially for females. In recent years, this model of local sports community sites has been recognised by international sporting bodies and inter-governmental organisations and has spread across the country.

Yet there were undoubtedly times throughout the project that as external volunteers we may have tried to input methods of coaching that were unsuitable to the local environment (i.e., lack of equipment in comparison to common UK sports communities). Further, there were times that, as mostly White volunteers, our knowledge was privileged and seen as a model form of sports coaching methodology. That being said, we were constantly encouraged to be reflective and ensure that we were not centralising ourselves within these projects. Rather it was the Zambian local volunteers and staff who were the main participants of this sports-for-development overall programme which the UK students support during the summer through a long-term partnership.

There is no doubt that participants signed up “to help Zambians”, to go on an “amazing adventure to Africa” and to gain useful experience for the world of work. I even brought back some chetenge (local wax fabric) as a souvenir from a weekend trip to Victoria Falls. Yet, I believe that as we were in the project the volunteers were increasingly reflective of their role, talks of White Saviourism, and questions pertaining to what sustainable volunteering was. On return, I attempted to argue with people in their comments upon my time, which often linked back to the narrative of “it shows how the other half lives”, alongside the questions of “does it make you appreciate life now you see them live with so happily with so little?”

To the peer who had challenged me, I rebutted that it was not a holiday, it was VfD. I still argue this. This essay will critically engage in debating the international role of voluntourism, rather than long-term, like the project that I have described. Moreover, this essay does not attempt to disregard (or debate) the impact of VfD. In terms of voluntourism, this article does not attempt to demonise all who engage in voluntourism. Rather it attempts to highlight how many of the volunteers, in addition to the industry, profit, exploit and subdue the local development of African communities for their own gain (even if they do have the best of intentions). My own personal experience, however, has given me a greater insight into the operation of how volunteering and tourism intertwines, and how the perceptions of these opportunities may appear both before and following these experiences.

Voluntourism itself is a relatively recent phenomenon (Simpson 2005; Dlaske 2016; Stebbins and Graham 2004; Palacios 2010), yet voluntourism is said to have grown from colonial history (Wearing 2001; Stebbins and Graham 2004). Mostafanezhad argues that the “most obvious predecessor” of voluntourism is European colonial missionaries (2013b, 330). There is a consensus that voluntourism replicates the colonial missionaries’ aim of *saving* African peoples as voluntourism groups continue to intervene in SSA under the guise of aid with a varying (usually lacking) amount of consent, similar to that of colonial missionaries (Vrasti and Montsion 2014; Vrasti 2012d). Colonialism was justified as helping everyone to develop, alongside it being a necessary task as the “White Man’s burden” to build Africa (Ekeh 1975, 94–99). Western voluntourism is said to appropriate humanitarian language by stating Africans need the West’s help to achieve development. Therefore, the rhetoric of voluntourism businesses that claim “Africans need your help” (McGloin and Georgeou 2015, 405), follows a similar line of justification to colonialism.

Voluntourism can be explored through a historical lens as a form of soft power, as an idea and in practice (Sobocinska 2017, 49–50). Thereby the ability of voluntourism to be used by Western states, businesses, and people to influence both domestic and international activity of other states stems from colonial relations as it is “rooted in global systems of power and influence at the intersection of decolonization” (ibid., 70.) This soft power of volunteering abroad was cemented through its progression from the long-term state-led VfD programmes in the ’60s such as the Peace Corps by the United States and International Citizen Service (ICS) ran by the UK Government (Sobocinska 2017, 50). When establishing the Peace Corps, President Kennedy specifically targeted states that were of American interest to use his soft-power instrument, the volunteers, to grow support for the West as a bloc in the Cold War (ibid.).

However, the recent development of the industry of voluntourism, although not directly stated, but rather encouraged by Western businesses and society (as soon explored through the design of the programmes), has certainly developed from these colonial and imperial soft-power roots. Freidus explored American students’ perspectives of their personal impact upon the children that they engaged with during their voluntourism in a Malawian orphanage (2017, 1018). It was found that some of the Western students believed that they were introducing Malawians to the hard work ethic of the “American Dream” (ibid.). Hence, the voluntourists believed that they were influencing Malawians to change their domestic employability to norms through their personal presence. Therefore, voluntourism is an act of international relations steeped in colonial history as the West seeks to ‘save’ Africa by doing what the West thinks is best for Africa – an inherent political element of these *holidays* that is often overlooked.

Today, voluntourism is a huge aspect of the tourism industry as “annually, more than 1.6 million globally conscious individuals pay to participate” in voluntourism projects (Mostafanezhad 2013b, 319; 2014). Voluntourists collectively spend around \$1 billion dollars on the industry each year (The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020) with the average trips costing between \$500 and \$2000 (TRAM 2008). Voluntourism has expanded massively and is huge part of the development industry (Simpson 2004; Strohmeier and Heleta 2020). This is seen explicitly in the number of Google searches of the term “Volunteer tourism” in a one month period from the year 2008 to 2017 increased from 230,000 to 6,170,000 (Suanpang, Srisuksai, and Tansutichon 2018, 334). Additionally, “Sub-Saharan Africa is one of the fastest growing Voluntourist destinations for young people from the Global North” (Strohmeier and Heleta 2020, 2). Conran argues that following this historical development, voluntourism is a “neo-colonial development encounter” (2011, 1465). Bandyopadhyay argues further that the “similarity between the history of colonization and the current practice of voluntourism, and the resulting negative connotations arising from it, are far too significant to be ignored” (2019, 328). Thus, the historical evolution of the idea of voluntourism cannot be ignored, and the roots of control, soft-power and influence remain.

Even in spite of the good intentions of voluntourists, the model and practice of the colonial intervention from which voluntourism has developed from shows that it is always “a political act” (Vrasti 2012a, 68). Even if volunteers themselves do not realise they are engaging in an act of politics, it has become a quotidian form of international relations, due to this historical

power imbalance which voluntourism has not fully separated itself from. This argument is furthered by Cheong and Miller who contend that despite voluntourists' aims to "remedy unequal balance of power between rich and poor", the business itself perpetuates a problem of international dependency (2000, 373). Furthermore with no explicit records that voluntourism was ever intended to be an apology, even, if viewed through the perspective of historic "liberal guilt" (Vrasti and Montsion 2014, 339), an assumption can be made that voluntourism is derived from the Western moral drive to improve the world. This is supported across the existing voluntourism literature, where one of the main aims if not the central aim is to "make a difference" and help "them" (Swan 2012, 244; Otoo 2013, 5–6; Jakubiak 2016; Wearing 2001, 1; Schech 2017). Hence voluntourism continues the West's role of intervening in Africa as it has done so throughout history.

This essay will argue the Western-centric design and silencing of African voices greatly weakens the argument that voluntourism, a commercialised form of poverty exploitation in Africa, is a genuine apology by the West. Having explored the history and the implications of colonialism on voluntourism, next, the design of voluntourism will be explored to understand the effectiveness of the industry in Africa.

## DESIGNATED AS HELP, DESIGNED FOR TOURISTS

First, voluntourism mainly brings unskilled young people, traditionally White middle-class (Vrasti and Montsion 2014; Sobocinska 2017; Vrasti 2012d; Mostafanezhad 2013a) students to SSA. Thus the impact that they have on African states in practical terms is often benign, as they are not qualified, or their lack of qualifications mean that their impact is damaging (Sobocinska 2017; Guttentag 2009; Barbieri, Santos, and Katsube 2012). Especially as young voluntourists from the West often lack knowledge or awareness of cultural norms, local histories, religious institutions and local politics (Strohmeier and Heleta 2020, 3), so they are both ill prepared and oblivious to local needs and customs. With many voluntourism trips, the *volunteering* aspect incorporates; "the building of infrastructure [that] may be inappropriate for local conditions (such as computer training in communities that lack regular electricity supply) or of poor quality, requiring costly repairs or replacement" (McAllum and Zahra 2017, 294). For example, Barbieri, Santos and Katsube observed that in Rwanda, the voluntourists helping at a care centre could not communicate effectively due to the language barrier thus they deviated from the curriculum thereby potentially threatening the educational development of the youngsters at the centre (2012, 513).

While teaching children and young adults is normally something that needs to be studied before it is practised, it seems that this often does not apply to Western voluntourists who work in many parts of the Global South. This is highly problematic as vulnerable children and young adults may suffer from lack of support and care by people who are not experienced enough to provide these in a professional and correct manner. (Strohmeier and Heleta 2020, 2)

At Zion Primary School in Ghana, scholars found in a ten-week observation that the design of voluntourism teaching programmes led to volunteers dictating and determining what education they believed to be worthy of teaching to the young Ghanaians rather than following the curriculum (Bargeman, Richards, and Govers 2018). This thus led to ineffective teaching as the children became further behind and had an "educational backlog" (2018, 1492). They also found that the design of this programme meant that voluntourists replaced the Ghanaian teacher. This resulted in the local availability of the teacher job opportunities becoming very limited by these visiting voluntourists. Thereby local development efforts of education and employability were negatively impacted by these Western volunteers thanks to the voluntourists at the centre of the programme design.

Another example is where many voluntourism trips including building a school or house, yet the group of young people are not builders. For example in South Africa, in a Habitat for Humanity project examined by South African scholars, most volunteers had not undertaken such an extensive building project before and, instead, saw this as an fun activity where they might improve on these skills (Stoddart and Rogerson 2004, 315–16). Similarly in Malawi, Freidus observed the multitude of skills undertaken by volunteers in crafting/building despite zero experience in these sectors (Freidus 2017, 1312). This is detrimental to development efforts as

they may take double the time or they may create an outcome which is unsustainable, costly, and critically, not involving the locals which they seek to help. This could be disastrous for the local community as “a hindering of work progress and the completion of unsatisfactory work, caused by volunteers lack of skills; a decrease in employment opportunities” (Guttentag 2009, 537). Therefore, despite the aforementioned good intention of volunteers to help, this does little to no good. Thus the “gift” of voluntourists to SSA is unmatched to African needs and is merely a token gesture of help.

Secondly, the design of voluntourism prioritises client (Western visitor) satisfaction. Therefore alongside helping Africans, there must be some sightseeing to make it worthwhile for the tourists (Sherri Brown et al. 2015, 160), thereby exemplifying that the purpose of these trips is not truly for African development, but rather as a business, they seek to please their customers, the voluntourists. Additionally, although voluntourism exists within a non-profit realm, it also occurs within businesses that are “explicitly for-profit” (McGehee 2014, 847). This prioritisation of Westerners can be seen as “tourism’s appropriation of humanitarianism” (Mostafanezhad 2013b, 320) where the “the main beneficiaries of volunteer tourism are the volunteers themselves” (Schech 2017, 9). In one voluntourism experience in Ghana, voluntourists recognised that they gained more than the Ghanaians that they sought to help (Vrasti 2012b). Crucially this leads to the idea that voluntourism is inefficient as in order for visitors’ interests to be prioritised, they must “ignore local preferences” (McAllum and Zahra 2017, 294). Hence the efficiency of the development and volunteering component of voluntourism is weak due to the centralisation of the volunteers’ experiences.

This was seen clearly in an exploration of Tamale Children’s Home in Ghana where the voluntourists only “worked” during the day. This was a source of complaint from the staff of the orphanage who claimed that the volunteers did not work nights despite this being the much more labour-intensive shift. This can be explained by the client-centric design of voluntourism. The voluntourists at Tamale stated that they wanted to play with them during the day and did not want to work through their nights (Bargeman, Richards, and Govers 2018, 1494–95). Fundamentally, voluntourism is a business, relying on customer money and thereby customer satisfaction; it is this continued client-orientation of voluntourism that implies that despite good intentions, alongside the low skill of the voluntourists, that voluntourism is symbolic and artificial help as part of a glorified holiday.

Thirdly, the short-term design of voluntourism adds to the detrimental impact of voluntourism as it leads to interrupted and unsustainable development. Voluntourism gives young Westerners a holiday and quick chance to help (Brown 2005, 480), where they can build some toilets, read some books and then explore, go on a hike, continue their vacation. It is claimed by voluntourism organisations that “every little bit will help” (Guttentag 2009, 543). However, the short span of voluntourism means the tourists are *inserted* into their projects. Guttentag implies in his evaluation of voluntourism, that the longer the project (the more it becomes VFD) the more effective and sustainable it is for local development (2009, 537). There must be time to take to teach/train the tourists, allow them to adjust, and then quickly they are finished. There are often gaps before the next volunteer, leading projects to be irregular, disjunctured, and not be as beneficial to the community or even fail (Vrasti and Montsion 2014; Wearing 2001; Guttentag 2009; Guttentag 2011). This creates an endless unsustainable cycle of Western visitors which means development is constantly interrupted.

This was witnessed in Barbieri’s exploration of a voluntourists in Rwanda where there was a lack of “continuity” in supplying voluntourists to some projects leading to some gaps in the teaching rota (Barbieri, Santos, and Katsube 2012, 514–15). This resulted in a lack of stable teaching and thus the cancellation of school classes for the children that they were supposed to be helping (ibid.). Fundamentally, voluntourism is inefficient as the design does not address root causes (Freidus 2017; Vrasti 2012c; Simpson 2004); it focuses on quick superficial attempts to “help Africans” that the unskilled Western young people can do on their holiday, and most importantly, enjoy. As Noé explains, despite the best intentions of volunteers, voluntourism simply cannot go beyond “short-term pain alleviation” (2018, 41). It must be transformed according to locals to effectively alleviate local problems in an efficient and collaborative manner.

Thus, the popular design of voluntourism sustains the ineffectiveness of this type of Western aid and continues a façade of Western help to SSA. It is important to recognise the growing popularity of voluntourism as it becomes the most important alt-tourism, as it is the largest market (Mostafanezhad 2013b; Schech 2017; Freidus 2017). For now, the design of voluntourism evidently focuses on the satisfaction of underprepared and under-qualified young Westerners on their quick holiday rather than the development needs of Africans, hence proving that voluntourism is merely symbolic as it does not seriously pursue improving African development.

## **“I WANT TO HELP (MYSELF)”: A SELFISH/SELFLESS HOLIDAY TO HELP “POOR” AFRICA**

Both the design and history of voluntourism demonstrate that it is symbolic “help” to SSA as it remains inefficient and focused on customer enjoyment rather than poverty alleviation. The institutionalisation of voluntourism in international relations and Western society is evidence that voluntourism is inherently an act of the Western moral consciousness. Scheyvens understands this practice as “justice tourism” (2002), as Western people attempts to make amends to Africa, rather than going on a simple beach holiday. Returning to Vrasti’s argument that voluntourism is a political act (2012a, 68), Brown and Hall add that voluntourism is as powerful and disruptive as oil and weapons (F. Brown and Hall 2008, 841) to Africa. Hence there is the need to explore the international system which voluntourism operates within and, the motivations of the West to engage in this relationship with SSA via voluntourism. Yet, simultaneously, this institutionalisation of voluntourism which makes it a Western-wide phenomenon shows the manner of which voluntourism is a disguised form of poverty profiteering, thus voluntourism is a “gift” forced from the West and an act of politicised international relations.

Voluntourism is presented as a “gift” to Africa as it expensive (Sherri Brown et al. 2015, 160); and therefore “selfless”: “overseas volunteering is generally considered to be a noble way of providing foreign assistance to the global poor” (Vrasti 2012d, 28). Voluntourists provide services such as teaching, cleaning, caretaking, or building schools; consequently, voluntourism can be seen as a gift as they receive no financial payment in return for their time and effort. This “good” deed to help Africa is seen to be one of sheer kindness due to the great financial expense of voluntourism. Rather than a traditional holiday, these trips cost around \$3000 (Butcher and Smith 2010, 33). Dedicating this much money to other people is seen as “noble”, especially towards Africa where it is seen as a morally correct adventure for Westerners (Stebbins and Graham 2004; Conran 2011; Akonor 2008). This proves that within Western society is the feeling of needing to help and to give to Africa, which in turn, has legitimised voluntourism because society feels that helping Africa is a worthy cause (Mostafanezhad 2013c, 162). Voluntourism is thus an altruistic donation of \$3000 to a company that organises a voluntourism stint, rather than simply a payment for a teenage holiday. Hence in the West, voluntourism is seen as a “good thing to do” as the money goes towards giving Africans “help” through the imposition of voluntourists in their communities.

Yet greater than donating, voluntourism undeniably determines you as a good person, as it is an inherently normative deed (Vrasti and Montsion 2014, 342). Sin argues that voluntourism enables the West to actually experience their region’s generosity in the deprived South, rather than simply fundraise and donate, as the Westerners can act out their social responsibility through these projects (2010, 984). It is the repeated “dedication” that separates voluntourism as a practice (despite the brevity of the design of these holidays) rather than a one-off donation. Subsequently the practice of voluntourism cements the person as a certified good person in society rather than a person who has simply “done good” (Vrasti 2012c, 1–5).

Moreover, Hancock’s adaptation of Bordieu’s theory of practice (2005), whereby Hancock determines cultural acts as a type of practice which furthers the proliferation of societally determined identities can be used to explain how voluntourism is a practice of “goodness” and completed by a “good person”. In other words, society’s romanticised view of voluntourism as described by Morrissey reinforces the “performative role” of a voluntourist (2022, 2). According to Hancock, culturally significant acts conducted by a person sustain society’s expectation of the person’s identity, thereby creating a continuous cycle of acts as practice and society’s

pre-prescribed understanding of an identity (2005). Hence voluntourism as a cultural practice is embedded with social values and the identity of a generous good person that is enacted through the voluntourists' action complying to the social expectation of the home society. Thus linking this act to the aforementioned chronicle of voluntourism and the practices of "giving" which preceded this industry, the modern-day missionary is a voluntourist. Both missionary and now voluntourist were deemed by their acts as "good people" by the society they call home, the West. As voluntourism is designed for the visitor, this emphasises the symbolic nature of this "gift" to Africa, as it remains a token which the Voluntourist feels good about, rather than a real attempt at development or any substantial apology.

A further example of the extent to which the Western "gift" of voluntourism to Africa has become entrenched in Western society is the necessity of a voluntourism trip as personal development. In order to gain social capital, or what Morrisey calls "cultural capital" (2022, 2) in a competitive business market, it is deemed a viable and attractive personal development opportunity for young Westerners to go on voluntourism trips (Vrasti and Montsion 2014; Freidus 2017). Simpson argues that engaging in voluntourism is becoming as important to career development as one's academics, with this experience equating to a qualification (2005, 448–52). There are some academic institutions that even include voluntourism as a block of their studies (Wright 2013, 241). It has almost become a necessity on young Westerners' CVs to apply for jobs and universities (Wright 2013, 241; McGloin and Georgeou 2015). Simpson therefore argues that this experience, the tourism of poverty, is equitable to their own education according to Western society. It is this institutionalisation of voluntourism in Western society that continues to illustrate that voluntourism is "aid" to SSA insofar that is a tool for Western futures rather than to help Africa. Critically, this transpires to show that the motivations of the West to engage in voluntourism, from society down to the individual level, is for personal gain alongside the idea of helping because it is deemed "good". Therefore, the West profits from the "gift" of their presence in Africa, despite doing little to help (or even worsening Africa's development), all whilst young Westerners holiday in African poverty. Having proven that the "gift" of voluntourism has been a façade through which Westerners take advantage of some of Africa's need for development for their own personal and societal development, we will now explore how this act of "goodness" capitalises on African poverty and is an act of power in international relations.

## A "GIFT" THAT AFRICA CANNOT REFUSE?

Voluntourism has become a permanent feature of international relations, not only due to the institutionalisation and popularity of voluntourism as a "good thing to do" in the West, but also due to the overwhelming force of the industry by the West on Africa. This section will explore how the explosion of voluntourism since the 1990s (Vrasti and Montsion 2014; Freidus 2017) is evidence of the force and overwhelming power of the Western tourism industry in SSA. Voluntourism can be understood as a business which provides the experience, safety and organisation of volunteering and adventure tourism around the developing world for a fee paid or fundraised by their customer, the voluntourist. Not all organisations operate voluntourism for profit; some such as One World Travel direct profits back into African development (Wearing 2001, 155). Yet others are known to run voluntourism trips as a profit-making enterprise (Wearing, Young, and Everingham 2017, 513). Coghlan and Noakes describe this as the "commercialization" of voluntourism to ensure the survival and sustainment of their goal of helping people (2012). Tomazos and Cooper emphasise how although keeping a social mission, there are many voluntourism organisations who have adapted a business model in which volunteers can purchase "extras" from the organisation. From city tours to safari experiences, this capitalisation of potential gains and push for more spending exemplifies how the focus is upon volunteers rather than development and so on to capitalise on their potential gains from the volunteers (Tomazos and Cooper 2012). This is especially emphasised, as although some voluntourism businesses direct their profits back into their projects and development, certainly not all do. Hence, grass-roots international development in the form of Western voluntourism is undoubtedly key in the rise of the "dev biz" (Dichter 2003, 98–110).

In the "dev biz", voluntourism can be explored as "pro-poor tourism" (Brown and Hall 2008, 842) which translates to what Mostafanezhad decries as "tourism's appropriation of humanitarianism" (Mostafanezhad 2013b, 320). Hence the industry exploits the impoverishment



and well-meaning African development efforts for their own profit. As this essay has explored, this poverty tourism in which wealth is extracted from situations and communities where there are certain marginalised Africans has been legitimised by the Western idea of helping “poor Africans” as undeniably “good”. Voluntourists’ efforts of inadequately skilled, short-term, and unsustainable self-centred volunteering demonstrates that the industry of voluntourism is a continued example of control and extraction of poorer communities in Africa. This can be determined due to the potential detrimental and often damaging impact of their volunteering; while not physically taking money from the local community, these voluntourist organisations stall local development in order to continue to run their holiday businesses. Hence, this emphasises the charade of voluntourism as a “gift” to Africa. Rather voluntourism is centred upon the development and experience of Western young people, economic profits and will now be explained to be a form of neo-colonial control.

Voluntourism is a forced “gift” from the West. The design allows the West(-ern businesses) to stay in profit, so voluntourism is contaminated with the neo-colonial tendencies found in the unequal relationship between the controlling profiteering donor and receiver of this “aid”, where local voices are excluded. The relevance of voluntourism within international relations is demonstrated due to the overt power imbalances between the predominantly Western volunteer and the local host community who are seen to need and thus rely on this “aid” (Wright 2013, 245). This “aid” can be shown to be forced upon Africa partly due to the unequal relationship between the two regions, with the exploitation of Africa as the “West’s pleasure periphery” (Bandyopadhyay 2019, 340).

Bandyopadhyay alludes to a Wallersteinian explanation of the exploitative voluntourism. For Bandyopadhyay, there is an unequal relationship. The West, as the ‘centre’ of the capitalist system, exploits SSA, the ‘periphery’, to maintain their dominant position in this international system (Wallerstein 2011). This explanation is demonstrated through Western-centric design of voluntourism, which curtails local development opportunities as these businesses gain from the state of deprivation which the communities that they utilise exist within. In other words, the lack of real-life development created by voluntourism essentially keeps the industry in business. Further to this, this system of extraction from the periphery of SSA, is inevitable due to the global capitalist system according to Wallerstein (2011). Thus the “dev biz” of which voluntourism is seen to be essential will continue to force voluntourism on Africa in order to continue profits for the West so they remain at the centre of the capital-centred global system.

Wallerstein’s view of the capitalist system is expanded upon by Cedric Robinson’s concept of Black Marxism, also known as racial capitalism (2020). Robinson adds a racialised lens to the world economy to explore the relationship between racial inequality and capitalism in the international system (Go 2021). Specifically, the relationship of the rich and White-dominated centre over the subordinated underdeveloped and non-White periphery<sup>1</sup> (Robinson 2020). Black Marxism centres global history as it outlines that the historical racist domination was normalised through the enslavement of Africans and the colonisation of the region (Robinson 2020, 313, Go 2021). This relationship explains how racist practices and enterprises sustain the economic subjugation of SSA, from which White-dominated states continue to profit in order to consolidate their central position in the racist capitalist world system (Robinson 2020). This racial relationship can in part explain the abundance of voluntourism in SSA and continued presence and gain of the White voluntourist across deprived African communities. Moreover, within the “dev biz”, the aforementioned concept of White Saviourism can be expanded to understand how voluntourism again sits within this system of racial capitalist exploitation. The West exploits this practice and businesses as a form of neo-colonialism as it both gains from and impacts the development of some African communities under the guise of aid as the benevolent West.

As voluntourism is conducted by Western companies and governments from White-dominated regions and operates heavily in non-White governed African states, Robinson’s theory explains the international racial relations of Western voluntourism. Moreover, voluntourism needs certain groups of African peoples to remain marginalised to sustain their business model. Therefore, the design centring the wishes and capabilities of White voluntourists over the

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1 These states are separated on the basis of the majority race of their government, rather than the majority race of the population (Robinson 2020).

development aims, alongside the inadequacy of their “help” at the cost of Africans’ time, money, and materials, continues to ensure that the White Westerners reach their goals even at the loss of host communities across SSA. Hence at an international level, voluntourism is an economic act funded by racial profiteering as this White-led enterprise relies on the poverty of the non-White world.

One such example of this system in action is how “many volunteer tourism projects are based on unskilled labour, volunteer tourists frequently perform jobs that locals could do instead” (Guttentag 2009, 544). Therefore, these voluntourists are diluting the job market and thus halting local development through the lack of job opportunities. Although these voluntourists are not getting paid, they profit from this opportunity in terms of experience and social capital through their continued presence in roles which locals could earn from. This was identified in Bargeman et al.’s exploration of voluntourists in a Ghanaian school whereby they found a correlation between an increase in voluntourists and decreasing in local teaching opportunities at Zion Primary School (2018, 1494). Whilst Western, mostly White students gained from this opportunity and Western organisations were able to impact teaching output, this negatively impacted local employability development. This in turn leads to African dependency on Western volunteers as the job market becomes undervalued and there is less capital to spend on hiring the local populations, so a cycle of external reliance begins. This opportunity of voluntourism occurs simultaneously alongside the exclusion of certain groups from employment that disperse money through communities, therefore enforcing a greater dependency on external aid due to a lack of development.

This uneven power dynamic shown at the international level is also explicit as within voluntourism between “host and guest”, (Mostafanezhad 2013b, 320). In Zambia, the local workers that were supposed to be supported by the voluntourists found that they experienced a power imbalance whereby the Western volunteers perceived themselves as superior and experts over their local work community (Nalungwe 2018, 102–3). This imbalance was furthered felt by the Zambian workers as they felt they were not valued as it was always them receiving volunteers; they were never given the chance to visit the West to share knowledge or experience with them (ibid.). This unequal dynamic at the individual level is evidence that despite the altruistic intentions of some within the industry of voluntourism, as discussed through the intention of “doing good”, the industry and the resulting relationship is forced upon Africa for profiteering and subordination.

Park identifies this perpetuation of an unequal host-and-guest hierarchy through his ethnographic observation of American engineering students participating in voluntourism in Cameroon by building a water distribution system as part of repeated trip by the US university (2018). Although they were qualified engineering students skilled enough for this task, they did not value local hosts’ dissenting opinions and were inadaptable to local styles of building (ibid., 154–56.) Parks summarises this project as “although the students claimed that they respected the locals as partners, they did not truly consider them as equals, and expected the locals to be silent, provide the support, and be grateful for whatever they were given” (ibid., 156). Symbolically, voluntourism, like the project in Cameroon, presents an idea of combined sustainable development yet perpetuates the superiority of these Western volunteers at the expense of silencing and belittling locals as should-be-grateful recipients. This again demonstrates an interaction within the unequal international system whereby local development is controlled externally by the wishes and goals of Western peoples. Wallerstein’s explanation is supported by this Cameroonian case study as the local workers’ attempts to improve their situation themselves were stifled as the project focussed upon keeping to the university’s long-term vision for the community, the continuation of the project for the students’ benefits and their position as being depended upon by the local community.

Voluntourism as a proponent of the unequal relationship and exploitation of the region (Brown 2009) is inextricably related to the aforementioned design of the voluntourism which the West has designed as for-profit rather than for African development. Linking back to the design of voluntourism, overall, there is seen to be a price to pay for host communities, such as for lost hours in teaching and re-building poorly built houses. Therefore, although there can be some blame placed on the capitalist system that both the West and SSA must survive within, the Western design of voluntourism has developed from its prior colonial racist interventions. Moreover, it is designed in a way which supports their cause through the extraction of these regions, rather

than a non-profit form of aid which truly attempts to alleviate African impoverishment. This is not a denial of the African ability to transform the industry, but rather an analysis of the strength of the industry and the racist capitalist system in which both Western and African actors are competing within.

Thus, voluntourism is a symbolic apology at best, as in reality, it is poverty profiteering disguised as help. As the businesses utilise the poverty and deprivation of some communities in SSA to gain profits from voluntourists, they simultaneously continue to implement Western-centric development programmes focussed on the volunteers' experience. This lack of focus upon African development condemns Africans to the periphery of their own structural development for Western profit. Therefore, the swarms of young White people who continue to holiday in poverty and their "help" is an unwanted "gift" which forces SSA to remain constrained (quietly). This essay will next explore how the silencing of African voices found in the design and operation of voluntourism only worsens the (neo-)colonial oppression of some African communities.

## THE WEST'S "APOLOGY" – AN OTHERED AFRICA

Having explored how the industry of voluntourism profits from the impoverishment of Africans, this essay will now discuss the dependency of voluntourism through the neo-colonial relationship and ideational Western rhetoric which the industry perpetuates. Just as "power dynamics are explicit in relationship between hosts and guests in voluntourism" (Mostafanezhad 2013b, 320), a neo-colonial power dynamic relationship can be extended to African and Western populations. This neo-colonial relationship has seen the prominence of the 'White Saviour' rhetoric due to the majority of voluntourists being White (Wearing et al. 2018; Bandyopadhyay 2019; McAllum and Zahra 2017). Further they become "saviours" as they view African people as needing saved and thus do not give them sufficient agency in their own developments. Instead, a White Saviour is seen to prioritise themselves even amongst African problems and poverty (ibid.). Said's tool of othering (1978) will be shown to perpetuate this power dichotomy through voluntourism of the West versus Africa. Returning to the ineffective design of voluntourism, where inexperienced White students go to Africa to "help" Africans but also – as this essay has explored – to help their own personal development, it will be argued that White Saviourism has two-fold implications, as it reinforced racialised othering Africans externally in the West, and internally, in Africa, an external dependency.

Externally, the White Saviour rhetoric is toxic in the West (McAllum and Zahra 2017; Wearing et al. 2018; Bandyopadhyay 2019) as it spreads an othered conception (Said, 1978) of weak and helpless Africans through social media and popular (Bandyopadhyay 2019; Wearing et al. 2018). This helplessness in turn provides more scope for the business of voluntourism to continue to exploit Africans through the poverty extraction and lack of prioritisation of African voices, which was evident in the exploration of the voluntourism design discussed earlier. The rhetoric of the White Saviour discourse is commonly spread through voluntourism, as young people rush to update their Facebook on return from a volunteer-holiday with a picture of themselves hugging a random child in Africa (Wearing et al. 2018; Crossley 2012, 246). On return, voluntourists perpetuate the problems caused by the design flaws of voluntourism, such as the continued centralisation of the White Western volunteer (Freidus 2017, 1307). The anonymity of a Black African child in their pictures (Wearing et al. 2018; Bandyopadhyay 2019) reinforces the silenced helpless child representation of African development through the rhetoric that the voluntourists spread online.

This commodification of African lives can be further seen through the lack of permission attained by the voluntourists from both the child and their parents to share pictures of the child. Parental permission is a commonplace procedure in the West, if a picture was taken without consent, this would be in severe breach of child protection laws (NSPCC 2021, Federal Trade Commission 2017). This suggests voluntourists feel they have a right over the child's digital privacy similar to a Western parent even after knowing the child and maybe the family, for just a few weeks, days or even minutes. Showing a complete disregard for the right to privacy of that child and respect for their family in exchange for some "likes" on Facebook and to be propelled Western societies view and in the world of work is the fundamentally racist silencing and denial of the Black Africans' rights to protect their child online. Yet again the

invasion and enforcement of voluntourism as a practice in African lives is despite the detriment that the design and conduct these programmes have on African lives.

On return, voluntourists reproduce discourse and racist views of an Africa that needs saved by the West, through these pictures of vulnerability. Mostafanezhad describes this spread of Western view of superiority and Saviourism as “the humanitarian gaze is extended through the re-presentation of volunteer tourism experiences on Facebook pages and the like throughout the West.” (2014, 492). This “humanitarianism gaze” has huge implications in the West, as Westerners spread the image that Africa still needs its hand held and supported. Particularly, Mostafanezhad’s understanding of this *othered* representation on return as a “gaze” furthers critical implications as it captures the West’s attention which awes at the “exoticism” of African poverty (F. Brown and Hall 2008, 839–42; Vrasti and Montsion 2014, 350; Barbieri, Santos, and Katsube 2012, 511) but as a gaze, nothing changes due to this passive view of poverty as a tourist sight. Oppositely, it can be generalised, on return White voluntourists do not share pictures of a rapidly urbanising Africa that they may have witnessed as they flew into the region. This could help to change the global discourse regarding African development. Rather, voluntourists often spread a simplified view of an Africa that needed their help as a way to justify their expensive trip by proving that they completed their “job” and helped some people in need.

This *infantilisation* of Africans (Dichter 2003; Vrasti 2012d), seen through the spread of the notion that children need saved and omitting African development practitioners and policies, continues the rhetoric in the West that Africans cannot be their own agents of change and that they need Western support. This discourse spread through voluntourists continues to other Africa as “weak” in Western discourse. Shown by the discourse of voluntourists on return, they reinforce that “historic roots of racial inferiority/superiority are perpetuated in volunteer tourism” (Bandyopadhyay 2019, 333) with views such as the idea that Africans are “poor but happy” (Crossley 2012; Simpson 2004). This poor-but-happy rhetoric trivialises poverty and the challenges faced by Africans, thus voluntourism sustains an idea that “they are happy with so little” (ibid.), as if Black people in Africa do not face similar challenges of development as many states in the West, and moreover are satisfied and stagnant in the face of adversity. Crucially, the design of voluntourism, which treats these unskilled young Westerners as experts, substantiates an idea that despite the improving development and lessening poverty of the region Africans still need saved by some smiling unskilled White people. Hence voluntourism forces African dependency, as it continues a rhetoric in the West that Africans are dependent on the West, thus there is less opportunity given to Africans as equals.

This reinforcement of colonial values, particularly, the idea that Africans need saving by the West is disappointing, as voluntourism has the potential to enlighten Westerners and thus transform the relationship of the West and Africa through impacting the everyday understandings of the “other”. Brown and Hall outline the potential positive implications of voluntourism if the world’s future leaders who may presently engage in voluntourism could understand how Africans live, the challenges they face, and the diverse manner of African problem solving (2008, 845). This perspective could encourage a more equal treatment of Africans and an end to the neo-colonial silencing of Africans, both within the development arena and the wider sphere of international relations. However, for as long as voluntourism remains designed around its current Western-centric model and the volunteers, themselves, complete benign tasks, tasks that they are not sufficiently qualified to complete, or refrain from effective equal engagement with the community, they will continue to neglect the agency of Africans to make their own improvements. In other words, future leaders who currently participate in voluntourism instead are being led to believe that Africa needs saved thanks to the profit-driven voluntourism which continues to present Africa as helpless and in need of, specifically Western, help.

Internally, the implications of voluntourism within Africa are vast, and whilst not all these implications are negative (Wearing 2001; F. Brown and Hall 2008), this essay’s critical evaluation of the design of voluntourism argued for the lessening of unqualified volunteers wasting resources and time (Brown 2005), as they damaged local work force’ efforts. Secondly the Western-led control of the industry (Mostafanezhad 2013b) was shown to enforce dependency on the West within SSA.

Most critically, internally, voluntourism continues the prioritisation of external, Western knowledge creation and preference (Lough and Carter-Black 2015, Cheong and Miller 2000). This is not to say that voluntourism does this alone. Voluntourism adds to the marginalisation of African knowledge through its Western-centric focus, which is inherent due to the majority demography of volunteers. Furthermore, in combination with other norms and international relations such as the Western-centred academe's exclusion of oral traditions (Jewsiewicki and Mudimbe 1993) and cultural and educational globalisation (Dzvimbo and Moloi 2013, 6), voluntourism pushes for the prioritisation of Western knowledge.

In Park's observation of US engineering students in Cameroon, he states that in pre-departure planning meetings, "Western paternalism and superiority over Africa were both implicit and explicit in the team's discourse of technology" (2018, 151). During the project the students disregarded African problem-solving approaches and local solutions as they enforced the development of this project along the Western-created plans (ibid.).

Students did not hesitate to pronounce criticism when the locals voiced different opinions. Some students criticised the local water technicians who did not comply with the way their team planned and suggested what they thought to be unrealistic plans. A student stated that the locals should follow their plan because they had a college professor with a PhD in engineering. (Park 2018, 154)

Strikingly, the superiority of the Western PhD over local workers exemplifies the complete disregard for non-Western experiences and knowledge. This silencing and subjugation of African knowledge is therefore continued as African development is enforced to be dependent on external solutions through these programmes. This can be understood as a neo-colonial pattern as the Western students ensure their desired method is operationalised for their own goals despite the detriment to local aims and realities.

This preference of Western knowledge is further exemplified through linguistic preferences to "colonial" languages such as French and English in voluntourism teach-and-travel programmes (McGehee 2012; Vrasti and Montsion 2014). These voluntourism programmes continue the push for Western languages over local language learning (Jakubiak 2016). Almost 40% of all voluntourism programmes comprise these teach-and-travel programmes (Callanan and Thomas 2005). Yet, some of these teaching programmes such as English-language voluntourism are argued to be "illusionary" aid (Jakubiak 2021, 110), examples of cultural imperialism (Ashdown, Dixe, and Talmage 2021), and can be seen to centre Western education over local education. Jakubiak states "English-language voluntourism's celebratory promotion of English (particularly in the name of development) may be read as a mechanism through which neoliberal prerogatives are maintained, naturalized, and expanded" (2012, 439). Hence the international relations repercussions upon internal African knowledge production allows the central advancement of Western academia's position as core in the global system of knowledge. Therefore teach-and-travel programmes enforce the continued dependency of African education on external sources of Western thought at the loss of the advancement and proliferation of indigenous African knowledge.

Moreover, as "power and knowledge cannot be separated" (Cheong and Miller 2000, 375), this lack of preference for local knowledge could threaten histories and cultures of African states, and so voluntourism continues a dangerous preference for Westernisation in education. This demonstrates the continuous potential threat of Westernisation through voluntourism as volunteers spread Western knowledge and language preference creating a dichotomous history with their own academia and culture. For future generations across SSA impacted by programmes such as these voluntourism teach-and-travel programmes, this inadequate education may have significance consequences in their educational and cultural development as knowledge remains external to local communities. Additionally, this inadvertent silencing of their own voices and histories limits the strength of SSA to argue that African approaches that differ from the West should be treated equally within development spheres. Therefore, it limits the ability of Africans to demand for more respect of a louder African-global voice and more equal international development.

Although this essay focussed mainly on the relationship between the West and Africa exhibited through Western voluntourism within SSA, it must be admitted that this summary of the internal implications of is concise and is worthy of much more analysis. It was essential that the

internal implications of voluntourism were explored to an extent, in order to prevent the further exclusion of African problems within this discussion. These implications are critical and must be discussed further to encourage a greater inclusion of the African voices and to work towards development that is more suited to the needs of Africans according to Africans themselves.

## CONCLUSION

Voluntourism is a Western industry which profits from the impoverishment of Africans, in doing so, it strengthens discourses of a weak Africa that must be saved, and its current design enforces African dependency on the West. Despite the good intentions of volunteers and some within the industry to truly help African peoples it cannot be considered well-meaning expiation by the West as the West continues to prioritise their own interests through forcing voluntourism rather than engaging in equal development programmes. Thus, voluntourism continues the West's pretence that it is listening to Africans whilst the West extorts Africa through its poverty-profiteering "aid". It forces this unequal development relationship rather than make reprimands for previous mistakes. Whilst voluntourism has potential to transform African dependency on the West, the overwhelmingly Western-centric design of voluntourism fails to prioritise African voices and thus continues an unequal power relationship propagating a destructive discourse both within Africa and the West. Hence, voluntourism remains a forced "gift" to Africans that they cannot refuse, which has become institutionalised as a "good thing to do", showing the engrained societal othering of Africans, as our young people continue to holiday in the poverty of others, without any lasting change to the global power dynamics.

To improve this discussion, the academic fields of tourism and international relations, must further their research to explore African perspectives on voluntourism, the relationship between development and the West, and finally prioritise these African views, which are currently a rare find in this field. African voices and experiences regarding these (un)invited guests must be listened to, in order to achieve a relationship of sustainable cooperative long-term development for African communities. Voluntourism can be transformed to be a more equal playing-field for development, which could have global reach from state-level development policies to changing the views of Africans in the everyday people which visit the region. This transformation is imperative as the numbers of voluntourists, and the potential (social media) reach of these Western visitors continues to increase so the greater the potential to change a global view of Africa and its people. Equally, if the industry does not change to a more Africa-inclusive form, the dangerous Western neo-colonial rhetoric of a "Weak Africa needing saved by the West" threatens to become even more permanent, and thus, damaging to SSA and its development.


## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am extremely grateful for the support that Dr. Tim Zajontz gave me throughout this entire writing process and for first encouraging me to go further with this article I first wrote for his challenging and dynamic class at the University of St. Andrews. He heavily supported me with this article and opened my eyes to new theories and concepts such as practice theory and Cedric Robinson's Black Marxism, which I am sure, beyond this paper will continue to shape my academic outlook. I am so grateful to have been in this amazing and dedicated professor's class – Thank you Tim!

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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#### TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Remers, I. (2022). Volunteerism in Sub-Saharan Africa is Expiation by the West, but Only Creates Further Dependency on the West. *Glocality*, 5(1): 2, pp. 1–17. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/glo.50>

Published: 13 July 2022

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*Glocality* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.

