Voluntourism in the Third World: Neoliberal Humanitarianism and Development

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This paper examines the ethics of voluntourism in the Third World. Voluntourism, as its name suggests, is a symbiosis of travel and aid. Voluntourism organizations charge a program fee for its participants, who seek to have both a meaningful and fun experience abroad. Organizations curate itineraries that feature opportunities for local community engagement, such as public health outreaches, and more typical, vacation-minded activities, like hiking and visiting national parks.

Despite voluntourism’s marketed appearance as a holistic, equitable, conscious alternative to tourism, it is ultimately incongruent with the developmental aspects of sustainability. Moreover, voluntourism reflects many of the criticisms of sustainable development itself. While contextualizing tourism as vehicle for development, firmly embedded in early economic growth-induced modernization theory, I demonstrate the discursive production of the Third World, illuminating the paternalism of partnership and the paradigm of development as a contemporary iteration of neoliberalism.

I explore the validity of voluntourism as a sustainable approach to community development. I consider the theoretical divide between the concept of voluntourism and its parental paradigm, sustainable development. Voluntourism distances itself from many of the problematic realities of traditional tourism industry, aligning instead with the principles and objectives embodied in the concept of sustainable development. In addition to published work, I draw on my internship experience with the Nkwa Foundation, a non-profit organization based in Cape Coast, Ghana, who regularly partners with voluntourist groups.