

# Access

The Stratosphere  
International  
Newsletter

## Choosing the Right Volunteer Experience

It is easy to get excited about volunteering overseas. We are motivated by a desire to see the world and help people that are struggling. But many times international volunteers return home disillusioned by the experience they had. They question whether they really made a difference in the lives of the people they worked with. Even worse, sometimes they worry the impact on the local community was negative.

Are there simple steps to ensure you are choosing a good international volunteer experience? If you take the time to ask a few questions and choose carefully, you will be rewarded with an experience you will learn from, an opportunity to contribute to real change, something to feel proud of, and stories you will tell for the rest of your life.

### 1) Learn to recognize the difference between charity and development:

Charity responds to immediate needs- providing food, providing emergency medical care, putting a warm coat on someone's back, or providing monthly funding for a child's education. There is nothing wrong with it but it is not a long term solution. And if it continues indefinitely it creates a dependency. Development focused projects help local people get a leg up. This means they look to alleviate dependency on charity by providing opportunity for better education, better business resources, and ultimately opportunity for financial independence.

### 2) Choose an organization that listens to the needs of the local community:

It is very easy to dream up a cool solution to a problem. However, sometimes the best ideas are simple and come directly from the community in need. Make sure the

organization you choose interviews communities to determine what they need and reviews short and long term success and challenges with the community members.

### 3) Work with organizations that support existing local expertise and organizations:

I can promise you every country you are interested in visiting has local experts and local organizations already doing development work and doing it well. Make sure the organization you choose supports existing local experts and local organizations. This means they work with local doctors, they support local tour companies, and they work with existing local schools, NGO's, social enterprises, and medical clinics. Not only will you be building on what they have already learned, you will be learning from experts in the field.

### 4) Do something that creates opportunities for business:

There is nothing more disillusioning than believing you are going to help and then finding out you are taking

## ['Choosing' cont'd]

away work from a local person. A very simple example is donating goods brought in from overseas. A better idea is to support the local economy by buying supplies in country for the project you are volunteering with. And ask yourself, is the project you are volunteering with going to create more opportunities for local people? A great example would be to improve people's access to knowledge and information by supporting new internet access, computer skills, libraries, outreach programs, and literacy programs. Whether they are a student

hoping to get into university, a farmer looking to improve yields, or a business person looking to improve access to markets- access to knowledge and information will help community members get a leg up.

### 5) Realize that more than anything else you are going to learn from your experience:

Be honest about what you can accomplish on a short volunteer experience overseas. Will you contribute to real change? Yes, through supporting long term sustainable resource projects such as those mentioned above. But

more than anything you will learn from local experts about what good community development is and return home to tell friends and family about your experience. And you will be able to make informed decisions in the future from something as simple as what charities to support, to the role you think Canada should take in international development or when helping after a natural disaster.

## Recommended social media links:

### Linda Raftree

@meowtree  
lindaraftree.wordpress.com/  
Linda works for Plan International. She writes regularly and honestly about her experiences. She is interested in children's rights, technology for development, and community directed development

### Sandra Schimmelpfennig

@Good\_Intent  
www.goodintent.org/  
Sandra provides a much needed critical eye shaped by her experiences in Thailand after the tsunami. She is interested in #smartaid and is a go to resource for amateurs and aid experts alike.

## #FF Favorite Tweeps this month:

### @viewfromthecave

Tom is relentless and dedicated to providing great resources and debate on international development and aid.

### @Solar\_Sister

Not only is Katherine running her own social enterprise that hires local women to sell affordable, safe solar lanterns, she is also a wonderful source of news and inspiration for solar electricity and international development.

## Top blog post this month:

@ithorpe's 20 (deceptively) low cost ideas for development <http://kmonadollaraday.wordpress.com/2011/01/10/20-deceptively-low-cost-ideas-for-development/> Ian critically examines the challenges of presenting donating bednets as a simple, cheap solution for combatting malaria.

## Celebrating Successes:



Stratosphere's partner, the Kitengesha Community Library in rural Uganda, was featured on the BBC news as a model for other communities to learn from. Watch the video at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-11499311>

Contact

### Jane Reitsma

[jane@stratosphereinternational.ca](mailto:jane@stratosphereinternational.ca)  
[www.stratosphereinternational.ca](http://www.stratosphereinternational.ca)  
@janereitsma  
604 671 1044