

# What you should know if you're considering volunteering in Africa

From college students looking to gain experience to tourists who want to feel like they're doing something unique, volunteering abroad seems to keep getting more popular. Either because of that, or in spite of it, concerns about effective and [ethical volunteering](#) practices are becoming more mainstream.

By [Tom Osaj](#) 10 Jun 2019



Perry Grone via [Unsplash](#)

Western volunteers travel to developing countries and poor communities around the world, but Africa seems to be especially alluring to those who want to go somewhere and make a difference. But before going on a volunteer trip to Africa (or anywhere), it's important to understand what makes volunteering beneficial and ethical, how to prepare for the trip, and what to expect. Below are just a few of the things potential volunteers should consider when going to Africa.

## The most effective projects are led by local people

Across Africa, [many projects](#) and organisations that host volunteers are founded and run by foreigners. Volunteers are often attracted to these programs because they see the Western presence as legitimizing. However, initiatives led by local people are much more likely to be successful and make an impact.

Why? Local people have a better understanding of what their community needs and what will work there. They know how to communicate, who to talk to, and how things work. They're more invested in effective programming because it affects their home and community, and they'll be there for the long run.

On the other hand, too many foreign-run projects are more focused on their own motivations and interests than on local priorities, and they often lack the understanding and relationships needed to make a difference. To volunteer more effectively, look for a way to support local efforts instead of working with outside organisations.

## Longer-term positions are more impactful

Many Westerners go to different parts of Africa to volunteer for a summer, a week, or even a day. But while these short-term projects can feel meaningful to the volunteers themselves, the unfortunate reality is that they don't make much of an impact on the local community. Such short stays don't give volunteers time to gain an understanding of the context or build relationships with local people, let alone enough time to accomplish anything lasting.

The community ends up with a revolving door of new volunteers coming through, usually requiring the same adjustment period and repeating the same mistakes. Committing to a longer-term position gives a volunteer much better chance of having a real impact.

### **Skilled volunteers can make a bigger difference**

Another issue is that many Westerners who go to volunteer in Africa don't have the skills the community needs. Further, volunteers sometimes end up doing things they're entirely unqualified for, such as constructing buildings or providing medical care, which often ends disastrously. But skilled professionals – whether it's doctors, engineers, teachers, or graphic designers – have specific knowledge and experience to offer the community.

Before going on a volunteer trip, make sure you have a concrete skill that's needed, and look for an opportunity where you can put it to use.

### **Many volunteer roles could be accomplished by local people**

Similarly, volunteers often come to Africa and end up doing jobs that local people have the skills and knowledge to do themselves – things like farming, construction, and administrative support. By doing these kinds of tasks, volunteers aren't contributing anything new to the community, and they're taking a job away from a local person. In many cases, they're less qualified than the local people who would be doing the work otherwise, and they don't do as good of a job.

The volunteer industry is littered with stories of foreigners who'd never set foot on a farm but came to teach locals who'd been farming for generations on how to do it. Or volunteers who came to construct a building that ended up collapsing or that local people had to tear down and rebuild. Or volunteers who built fences or wells that ended up taking longer and costing more than when they're built locally.

When you're looking at volunteer positions, consider whether they could be done (or done better) by local people. Look for one that would allow you to contribute something the community couldn't otherwise access.

### **It's important to dress modestly**

African cultures tend to be very conservative, which is reflected in their expectations around dress. Norms are slightly less strict in urban areas, but even in the biggest cities, covering up is expected. For the most part, revealing shoulders, knees, cleavage, or midriffs is considered inappropriate, so the best clothes are capri-length or full-length pants, dresses and skirts that hit below the knee, and tops with some kind of sleeves.

You won't have much opportunity to wear things like shorts and tank tops. Not showing too much skin is necessary for gaining the [respect of local people](#), which is especially important when you're volunteering and trying to make a difference.

## People in Africa dress up more than you think

Africans dressed in rags and covered in dirt is a common stereotype in the West, and not a very respectful one. There are certainly places where levels of poverty are so high that people have very limited wardrobe and hygiene options. By and large, however, you'll find that Africans take a lot of care in their clothing and appearance. People dress fashionably and often more formally than in the West, and things like make-up, perfume, and nail polish are all commonplace.

Yet, because they buy into the stereotype, volunteers going Africa often pack only their oldest, most ragged least dressy clothes. Or they think they should bring heavy-duty outdoors clothes for everyday wear. But wearing things you'd never go out in at home or acting like you're going deep into the wilderness ("because it's Africa!") is patronising. Besides, foreigners in sweatpants or safari gear don't garner much respect from local people, which is important for volunteers if they want to be taken seriously.

Nothing can fully prepare you for a volunteer trip to Africa, and no project or organisation is perfect. The volunteer industry is rife with problems, and it's almost cliché by now that volunteers usually benefit more than the people they go to help. But if you can offer skills that are needed and you understand what to expect, you'll be far more likely to be able to make a difference.

## You have to get used to local concepts of time

Standards of punctuality and productivity just aren't the same in most developing countries as they are in the West. The [African concept of time](#) is more fluid, and it's sometimes hard to know when (or if) things will happen. You might be told a bus is leaving "soon," only to still be waiting hours later. Or you may be told a journey will take an hour when it actually takes three.

Similarly, it's not uncommon for meetings to start hours behind schedule, for something to not happen until days later than expected, and to encounter all kinds of unexpected delays. Stuff gets lost, the power goes out, people leave town, you have to wait for paperwork and approval, and many other things can happen that will inhibit your work as a volunteer.

It's easy to get frustrated when these things happen and to feel like you're not able to make the most of your time. But it's important to remember that these delays are part of normal life there, and they're things local people experience every day. Some of the most important traits of successful volunteers are flexibility, patience, and a willingness to go with the flow.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom Osaj is a traveller and adventure seeker. He's already been in more than 25 countries, has lived in Spain, The UK, Egypt, and Hong Kong and there is no sign he will stop anytime soon. He's energetic and fearless and extremely funny. Lately, he has been volunteering in Africa as he believes that helping people in need fulfills his destiny.