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The operations of volunteering agencies in voluntourism: A decolonial review

By Kiomy Eefting
s4332385

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Abstract

The voluntourism industry has received numerous criticisms, arguing that its practices perpetuate colonial hierarchies through epistemological domination, lack of local involvement, and inability to provide sustainable solutions. It aims to identify the harmful practices of voluntourism while exploring possibilities for more mutually beneficial voluntourism. This study utilises interviews with volunteering agencies and volunteers to explore the operations of the agencies and their interactions with the host communities. The incorporated decolonial lens assesses existing practices and provides strategies to decolonise the industry. Findings indicate that the commercial nature of volunteering agencies results in the prioritisation of the experience of volunteers rather than the contribution to host community contexts. Through short-term placements, feel-good activities, and commodified structural problems, agencies appeal to volunteers' expectations, leaving little room for the needs and knowledge of the host community, denying them agency over their development. The less commercial agencies have made steps towards a decolonised industry by ensuring appropriate volunteer placement, cultural training, eradication of belittling narratives, and increased involvement in projects, while remaining the dominant actors. The operations of volunteering agencies thus interact with host communities in various ways, generally, the industry should aim to discard its focus on volunteer experiences and integrate local knowledge, needs, and agency to make its interactions more beneficial for local communities.

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Table of contents

List of figures

1. Introduction

The rise of mass tourism poses challenges to the tourism industry, resulting in a call for more mutually beneficial forms of tourism. This sparked the emergence of voluntourism to help local communities while exploring their country and culture (Pastran, 2014). In the early stages of voluntourism discourse, Wearing, a prominent scholar in tourism literature developed the following definition of voluntourism: ‘‘those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organised way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments, or research into aspects of society or environment’’ (Wearing, 2001: 1). Voluntourism, combining volunteering and tourism, is a form of tourism where tourists engage in volunteering activities such as teaching, nature conservation or community development while exploring new cultures and destinations (Holmes et al., 2010).

This thesis explores the voluntourism industry in the Netherlands, where the landscape is highly diverse in terms of voluntourism providers. It includes commercial organisations, non-profit organisations and social enterprises. They offer a wide range of options in different sectors such as education, residential care centres, construction, agriculture, and nature conservation. These volunteering activities can be long-term or short-term, they can be done individually or in a group setting, in cities or rural areas globally, but mainly focusing on the Global South (Kinsbergen et al., 2021). The Dutch voluntourism industry emerged in the 1990s when, after development cooperation, the first tourism-oriented organisations entered the market. In the early 2000s, the number of voluntourism providers increased by 275%. This steep increase can likely be explained by increasing globalisation and the ease of travel. However, similar to the

global voluntourism industry, the Dutch industry faced criticisms, resulting in the stagnation of the industry's growth after 2010. The effects of the public debate and campaigns criticising international volunteering, especially the volunteering involving children and orphanages, became visible at this time (Kingsbergen et al., 2021).

This criticism relates to a broader issue in the general tourism industry, in which multiple interlinked ideas explain these colonial dynamics. Firstly, the industry exoticises non-Western destinations by marketing them as untouched landscapes, authentic cultures, and adventurous encounters. These orientalist ideas commodify the exoticness or poverty of destinations while discarding their true culture and history (Nightengale, 2019). Secondly, the commodification, together with the perpetuated Western influence, dominates education, knowledge production, and customs in the Global South as Western practices are considered superior. This results in local voices being marginalised and host communities being portrayed as passive participants in tourism (Bhattacharyya, 1997). Besides the cultural dominance, Western actors are also the more economically powerful actors. They invest in the infrastructure needed for tourism and therefore have the dominant position in decision-making as they allocate financial resources. As a result, tourism revenues leak back to Western businesses and host communities are exploited, commodified and marginalised while receiving a small share of the generated income (MacNeill, 2017).

These issues extend to voluntourism, often occurring in the Global South, faces criticism for its colonial undertones and reinforcement of stereotypes. Palacios (2010) and Guttentag (2009) argue that it undermines local expertise, fosters dependency, and romanticises poverty, offering feel-good experiences for volunteers while ignoring structural issues like inequality and coloniality. Marketing tends to emphasise the volunteer's transformation over community needs

(Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006), with unqualified volunteers performing critical tasks, often to poor standards and at the expense of local employment (Crossley, 2012). The commodification of these experiences raises concerns about who truly benefits, as host communities are often sidelined in favour of satisfying paying voluntourists (Simpson, 2004). McGehee (2014) argues that the exploitation of host communities and their environments, dependency, mismanagement of resources, unqualified volunteers reducing employment for locals, and a lack of communication among stakeholders are real and growing threats that can harm the host communities.

As mentioned, many scholars have raised concerns about the voluntourism industry (Crossley, 2012; Guttentag, 2009; McGehee, 2014; Palacios, 2010). Building on these criticisms, Kinsbergen et al. (2021) researched the impact of criticism on volunteering agencies, highlighting how this paved the way for non-specialised agencies, gaining a position in the industry. Additionally, Hernandez-Maskivker et al. (2018) examined the impacts of voluntourism on host communities through the perspective of volunteering agencies managers, while identifying the need to shift to co-creation, the colonial narrative remains unaddressed. Previous research has addressed criticisms, impact on host communities, and the role of volunteering agencies, but there seems to be a gap in the exploration of the actual operations of volunteering agencies concerning their colonial nature and how this interacts with host communities from the perspective of the agencies themselves.

Hence, there is a need to explore the existence of these practices and where they arise in the operations of volunteering agencies. Pinpointing where voluntourism is going in a harmful direction is essential to address the problem and minimise the harm to host communities. Therefore, this thesis analyses the operations of volunteering agencies in the Netherlands by

conducting interviews with volunteering agency representatives and volunteers. It aims to find whether and in what stages the operations lead to colonial practices and what the current strategies are to minimise harm and ensure community well-being and benefits. Moreover, it aims to force volunteering agencies to reconsider their operations and serve as a stepping stone for more mutually beneficial voluntourism. Accordingly, the study explores the following research question: *How do the operations of Dutch agencies offering voluntourism interact with the host communities?* Firstly, this research looks into existing literature on voluntourism criticisms, coloniality, interaction with local communities, and current decolonial efforts. Secondly, it explores the operations of the volunteering agencies and how volunteers experience this. Lastly, it combines the existing literature and theories with the study's findings, resulting in a critical assessment of current operations while highlighting good practices and establishing insufficiently addressed issues.

2. Literature review

2.1 The voluntourism critique

The voluntourism industry has faced significant criticism throughout its existence. Even though the industry departs from good intentions, their practices produce noteworthy side effects. Many are concerned about the commodification of local context, Western domination and lack of structural high-quality projects. Therefore, this section explores the criticisms the industry faces and its interactions with host communities.

First of all, voluntourism commodifies altruism and poverty by packaging volunteering experiences as a profitable product. As a result, poverty becomes an attraction rather than a complex societal issue. Sin (2009) critiques the industry for appealing to volunteers' emotions by offering a feel-good narrative that reduces social issues to consumable experiences. Likewise, altruism is commodified as voluntourism is marketed as a personal transformative experience while marginalising the actual needs of the community (Mostafanezhad, 2014). Consequently, local voices are often marginalised in the design of voluntourism projects. Wearing and McGehee (2013) argue that voluntourism tends to reinforce Western voices while disregarding local perspectives and knowledge systems. Many initiatives are designed with little local involvement, misaligning projects with local needs.

These commodified and marginalising packages then spill over into more negative impacts of voluntourism. For instance, the short-term placement of volunteers participating for two or three weeks leads to insufficient time to understand local contexts or bring lasting change. Guttentag (2009) argues that these short placements prioritise the experience of the volunteer over structural development. Furthermore, he claims that voluntourists are more concerned with personal growth than local needs, creating cycles of ineffective interventions for local communities.

The other issue, concerning labour, is twodimensional as it concerns the quality and displacement of local labour. The placement of unskilled volunteers in construction, teaching, or childcare occupations with little experience can result in substandard or inefficient outcomes that misalign with the needs of the community (Loiseau et. al., 2016). Besides a lack of expertise to contribute effectively, the placement of volunteers also displaces local labour. The cheaper labour volunteers offer leads to reduced employment opportunities for locals. This practice

undermines the local economy both in terms of income for locals and tax revenue for governments (Vo, 2024).

Furthermore, communities receiving large numbers of volunteers can become dependent on this form of tourism. When the development of their environment is done through projects imposed by voluntourism, the livelihood of locals depends on it, as most projects do not provide training and infrastructure to make projects community-owned. Hence, projects can create dependency by unintentionally focusing on providing aid rather than empowerment (Sin et. al., 2015).

Lastly, the evaluation of projects is criticised for being volunteer-centric. Guttentag (2009) argues that evaluations lack comprehensive impact assessments as they rely on volunteer feedback rather than systematic and evidence-based local methodologies. An additional factor is the short-term nature of voluntourism experiences, making it difficult to measure sustainability and meaningful development outcomes (Simpson, 2004). Moreover, the content of the evaluations lacks local input and prioritises volunteers' satisfaction and perceived learning rather than community benefit (Palacios, 2010). This is supported by Sin (2009), arguing that evaluations fail to incorporate local input and, as a result, mask exploitation and misrepresentation of needs.

The combination of the abovementioned issues results in voluntourism lacking the capacity to have a sustainable and structural impact. Because voluntourism tends to focus on short-term and visible work, it undermines local expertise, and prioritises the volunteer experience, it fails to challenge the actual problems of poverty, inequality and poor governance, thus providing superficial solutions (Lyons et. al, 2012).

In the voluntourism industry, volunteering agencies perform essential roles as they are responsible for organising and shaping these volunteering experiences. They play a massive role in constructing tourists' perceptions, expectations, and behaviours by designing itineraries and activities (Pastiu et al., 2014). Goldblatt and Nelson (2001) define a travel agency as a firm qualified to arrange travel-related retail services on behalf of various tourism industry principals. They argue travel agencies offer completely organised volunteering experiences and thus control which businesses are cooperated with throughout their projects' entire chain of operations. However, one also finds agencies within the industry that merely arrange volunteer placements, food and accommodation without providing the entire tourist package, which also includes flights and leisure activities. Hence, this study uses the term volunteering agency to refer to all organisations sending volunteers to projects in the Global South. The role of volunteering agencies in the tourism industry could be summarised by their great power to influence and direct consumer demand compared to other industries and by acting as an interface between supply and different segments of demand (Pastiue et al., 2014). As a result, travel agencies are the stakeholders between the tourists and the local communities and businesses, which makes them the agents of change.

2.2 The colonial narrative

The critique of voluntourism demonstrates that coloniality is a highly contentious societal issue and thus important to reflect on when studying voluntourism and its context. Considering the local perspectives of colonial oppression and painfully lived experiences and legacies, it is crucial to understand voluntourism's interaction with host communities. Quijano (2000) refers to

coloniality as the enduring patterns of power, knowledge and hierarchy established during colonialism that persist to shape the modern world even after the formal end of colonial administrations. He emphasises that the hierarchies originating from colonialism became foundational to modern global systems and that they are still embedded in contemporary life. In the literature, voluntourism's nature is often considered neocolonial. Bandyopadhyay and Patil (2017) explain this as the continuation of colonial power dynamics, where, often, white volunteers from the Global North assume roles of authority, knowledge, and saviourism in Global South communities. This relation reinforces a hierarchy in which the South is dependent, in need of rescue, and incapable of self-determination, while the North is benevolent, superior, and developed.

As a result of the industry's colonial dynamics, many of the abovementioned criticisms are rooted in colonial hierarchies and stereotypes. The still-existing power imbalance between the Global North and the Global South perpetuates the North's dominance. This leaves local voices unheard and local knowledge systems undermined, resulting in another "civilising mission" by the North to impose its development strategies on the South, demonstrating that voluntourism reinforces unequal power relations and colonial hierarchies (Mostafanezhad, 2014). Additionally, voluntourism reinforces colonial stereotypes. The lack of local involvement and imposed Western initiatives perpetuates the stereotype of Western knowledge being superior to local knowledge systems. This can also be seen in the placement of unskilled volunteers, where young Western volunteers with little experience are deemed to have the skills and knowledge to transform local contexts rather than people with lived experiences in this context (Loiseau et. al., 2016).

Shifting the focus to the operations of volunteering agencies, they are believed to reinforce colonial relations as they prioritise the needs of tourists and the profit they bring along over genuine cultural engagement (Mowfurth & Munt, 2015). Sin (2010) similarly argues that travel agencies prioritise marketability over ethical considerations and perpetuate colonial stereotypes and assumptions through their marketing strategies. As mentioned earlier, volunteering agencies tend to portray local communities as poor and helpless and volunteers as the saviours. This implies that development is provided by the West, and locals are grateful recipients rather than co-constructors. The marketing merely focuses on the personal transformation of volunteers and gives pitiful representations of locals, which downplays their agency and complex contexts (Bandyopadhyay & Patil, 2017). The industry's dependence on these perceptions is problematic and marginalises host communities. Therefore, they should critically reflect on their role in perpetuating colonial relations and other criticisms, and how they can include a decolonial and mutually-beneficial lens in their operations.

2.3 Interaction with host communities

The interaction with the communities hosting the volunteering experience plays an essential role in the impact of voluntourism. Interaction refers to the reciprocal action or influence between individuals, groups, or systems. It involves communication, behaviour, or engagement where each party affects and is affected by the other, often shaping relationships, outcomes, and understandings (Goffman, 1959). This interaction reveals a complex mix of benefits, interests, and unintended consequences. Voluntourism interacts with its host communities in an economic, social, and practical sense.

In terms of economic interaction, voluntourism contributes to the local economy by direct expenditure on accommodation, food, services or souvenirs. Hence, voluntourism stimulates local entrepreneurship through guesthouses, cultural performances and guided tours that serve volunteers (Wearing, 2001). Besides direct income, host communities can benefit from improved infrastructure and material donations (Raymond & Hall, 2008). Moreover, volunteering agencies cooperate with NGOs or community-based organisations (CBOs), potentially channelling resources into often underfunded sectors like education and healthcare. This provides small communities with aid they would otherwise likely be excluded from (Palacios, 2010).

However, these proposed benefits are not always a reality. Benefit leakage is a common issue as companies managing the industry are often Western NGOs and volunteering agencies, retaining a large share of volunteering fees before they reach host communities (MacNeill, 2017). Additionally, McGehee and Andereck (2009) mention that volunteers often stay in accommodations owned by expatriates or international NGOs rather than local companies. This limits local economic capture and contributes to uneven development outcomes. Moreover, the free labour of volunteers is concerning as they may distort the market and displace local labour (Guttentag, 2009). Communities relying on voluntourism might shift their focus from long-term economic planning to short-term projects appealing to volunteers, thus perpetuating economic dependency (Simpson, 2004). Mostafanezhad (2014) refers to this as "philanthropic capitalism" since the volunteer experience is the primary product rather than community benefit.

Secondly, in terms of social interaction, the desire behind voluntourism seems promising. Voluntourism has the potential to foster social capital by locals and volunteers building cross-cultural relationships, establishing empathy and mutual understanding (Wearing & McGehee, 2013). Palacios (2010) argues that host communities sometimes report increased global awareness and pride in their culture through sharing local customs and traditions with volunteers. Nevertheless, the depth of these interactions is often limited by the short-term nature of most voluntourism experiences, constraining volunteers' capacity to fully understand the local context or contribute sustainably (Raymond & Hall, 2008).

Another main social concern is the perpetuation of unequal power relations. Considering most voluntourists are young, white, Western individuals, they arrive with assumptions of their ability to resolve the issue in the Global South context, reinforcing colonial dynamics of superiority (Simpson, 2004; Sin, 2010). Host communities are often positioned as passive recipients of aid while Western volunteers are their saviours, undermining local agency and autonomy. As a result, local capacity-building is hindered and harmful stereotypes of underdevelopment and helplessness are reinforced (Mostfanezhad, 2014).

Consequently, voluntourism influences how communities perceive themselves and are perceived by others. Continuous interaction with volunteers can commodify local culture, with traditions and identities being adapted or performed to appeal to external expectations (Guttentag, 2009). Furthermore, this can result in shifts in local behaviour and norms, which irreversibly reshape community dynamics when communities identify features that appeal to volunteers (Raymond & Hall, 2008). These interactions can create tensions within communities,

especially if particular groups benefit more from voluntourism than others and class, ethnic or gender divisions are reinforced (McGehee & Andereck, 2009).

2.4 Addressing the criticism

The problem of coloniality within voluntourism has been widely acknowledged; however, ideas on tackling the problem take different directions. One strand advocates for refraining from voluntourism, arguing that voluntourism is inherently neo-colonial, exploitative and unethical; rather than in need of reform, the industry should be abolished (Angod, 2022; Vrasti, 2012). The other, acknowledging the problematic structures, emphasises the need for a decolonial approach to transform the tourism industry by separating from Western knowledge systems and prioritising local knowledge (Mignolo, 2007). Additionally, this requires the rethinking of who defines development and whose perspective is engaged with (Escobar, 2011).

The problematic nature of voluntourism experiences finds one of its roots in the marketing narrative. Volunteering agencies should refrain from traditional marketing that portrays host communities as helpless and volunteers as saviours, and rather focus on community strengths and agency (Vrasti, 2012). The reframed narrative emphasises storytelling that reflects the dignity and agency of local contexts. It encourages agencies and volunteers to obtain informed consent from the local community to share photos or stories to centre the communities' agency rather than their heroism. Accordingly, marketing should emphasise collaboration, mutual learning, and local strengths based on the community's voice, reframing development as a process of solidarity rather than charity (Mahrouse, 2014).

Furthermore, a decolonised voluntourism experience should start with a pre-departure training that engages volunteers ethically and reflectively. It should help volunteers understand the colonial legacies of international aid and investigate their positionality, encouraging reflection on privilege, cultural humility and structural inequalities. Traditional orientation training tends to focus on cultural sensitivity, and while important, it often neglects the underlying structural analysis (Tiessen & Heron, 2012). Maingi & Gowreesunkar (2024) argue that assumptions can be deconstructed when awareness about inequalities and injustices is raised through education and sensitisation. Hence, the proposed training material should confront volunteers with their privilege and domination in global systems through readings on colonialism, racial capitalism, and local resistance, and through exercises that foster reflexivity and cultural humility (Tiessen & Heron, 2012).

Another presumably obvious decolonial strategy would be to increase local involvement in voluntourism operations. However, traditionally the Western volunteer-sending organisations and international NGOs hold the dominant position in decision-making (Perold et. al., 2013). Decolonised voluntourism should thus encourage local community input and shift the decision-making power towards them. This ensures local agency and autonomy, allowing them to determine the appropriate scope concerning their needs and objectives, meaning volunteers are placed based on identified needs rather than imposed projects. The proposed shift fosters equitable partnerships rooted in respect, ensuring local governance and thereby enhancing accountability and relevance (Perold et al., 2013). Community-led models not only acknowledge the expertise of local knowledge systems but also resist the paternalistic logic that underpins

traditional aid projects, thus deconstructing senses of inferiority and boosting self-esteem (Wearing & McGehee, 2013).

Additionally, the placement of volunteers in relation to their skills and duration of the stay requires reconsideration. The short-term placement of often unskilled volunteers results in unsustainable substandard results for the communities, as it prioritises the volunteer's experience (Guttentag, 2009). Hence, decolonial strategies advocate for longer stays and community-led engagements that align with volunteers' skills or educational background. Extended placements allow volunteers to gain a better understanding of local contexts, meaning they can offer meaningful contributions when they have adequate skills, their roles are appropriate for the context, and local labour is not displaced (McBride & Lough, 2010). This entails that skilled volunteers are invited through community initiatives under the supervision of local professionals, providing assistance rather than undermining their expertise. Moreover, it deconstructs the assumption that any volunteer from the West is qualified to work in the Global South (Tiessen, 2017).

Lastly, project evaluation needs to distance itself from donor-centric benchmarks that prioritise the volunteer experience and absolute numbers rather than the nuanced social and cultural interactions (Grabowski et al., 2021). Decolonial evaluation methods use a more qualitative metric that focuses on enhanced local capacities, increased community ownership, and improved social equality. It employs participatory tools that allow communities to express their priorities and assess outcomes in relation to their goals. (Baillie Smith & Laurie, 2011).

This strategy again challenges the imposition of Western standards and ideas by valuing local assessments and knowledge systems.

When these decolonial strategies are applied to volunteering agencies' operations, voluntourism might be able to shift towards structural and sustainable impact. Removing the short-term, unqualified labour and imposed solutions barriers and replacing them with initiatives that enhance local capacity-building based on local values should transform voluntourism into a sustainable practice. This requires structural problems of poverty, corruption and inequality to be challenged (Tiessen & Heron, 2012). Hence, voluntourism should focus on building local capacities and infrastructure, allowing for structural income and development (Lyons et al., 2012). Simultaneously, transparency and accountability should be promoted to reduce corruption (Chen & Ganapati, 2023). Furthermore, inequality should be erased by empowering marginalised communities (Qureshi et al, 2025) and ensuring access to education (Blanden et al., 2022).

3. Theoretical framework

This study follows decolonial theory by combining thoughts from multiple decolonial scholars, who actively challenge institutionalised colonial legacies embedded in the structures of the current world order. The thoughts emerged as a response to the lasting legacies of colonialism and the dominant influence of Eurocentric epistemologies or knowledge systems. Originating from the experiences and traditions of the Global South, this theory challenges the structures of power, knowledge and being that were institutionalised during the colonial era and

are still prevalent in contemporary forms of capitalism and development (Escobar, 2004; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2000).

A foundational contribution to the theory is Quijano's (2000) notion of coloniality of power. He refers to the concept of coloniality as enduring structures of power, knowledge, and being that found their origins in the colonial period and continue to influence modern-day social, political, and economic systems. He coined the notion of coloniality of power, revealing the intersection of race and labour. This highlights colonial systems imposing racialised and hierarchical regimes categorising the superior and privileged European identity and the marginalised and inferior indigenous, African, Asian or other non-European identities (Quijano, 2000). His view challenges the notion that colonialism is a historical event and rather frames it as an ongoing structure.

Building on this work, Mignolo (2007) and Maldonado-Torres (2007) expand coloniality, introducing coloniality of knowledge and coloniality of being. The dominance of Western epistemologies being taken as the universal way of thinking while devaluing indigenous and non-Western ways of knowing is what Mignolo (2007) considers coloniality of knowledge. This dominance of Western knowledge production systems is a direct extension of colonial logic that mainly impacts the fields of economics, education, and science. Moreover, he advocates for epistemic delinking, a process through which knowledge production is reoriented toward local histories and epistemologies. The coloniality of being coined by Maldonado-Torres (2007) examines the dehumanisation of colonised peoples, highlighting how they were excluded and denied agency over their own being by systemic racism. Colonised people were often portrayed

as irrational, uncivilised, or inferior, justifying their domination and marginalisation within both political systems and philosophical traditions rooted in Western humanism. He emphasises the existential violence and dehumanisation embedded in colonial systems and their continuation in racial capitalism, global governance, and even humanitarianism (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Escobar (2004) adds that Western frameworks that are termed to be universal have dominated indigenous systems, reinforcing dependency, hierarchy and cultural domination. Hence, he introduces the idea of pluriversality in which he envisions a world where multiple ways of being, knowing and relating to nature coexist while challenging the norms constructed by modernity (Escobar, 2018).

Shifting the focus to modern times, renowned scholars in the decoloniality field, including Quijano, Mignolo and Escobar, state that coloniality and modernity are interconnected. With multiple works on development, globalisation and decolonial alternatives, Escobar is influential in modernity and coloniality discourse (Escobar, 2004, 2007, 2018). Modernity is often described as a journey of progress and development, but it is deeply tied to colonialism. The rise of modern nation-states and capitalist economies was made possible through the exploitation and violence that came with colonial expansion. Therefore, it is impossible to understand modernity without recognising its colonial foundations. This viewpoint opposes Eurocentric views of modernity and advocates for acknowledging alternative indigenous histories and decolonial futures (Escobar, 2007). Similarly, Mignolo (2013) suggests that the notion of decoloniality challenges colonial structures. He advocates for the restoration of indigenous knowledge systems and political autonomy as a strategy to challenge Western hegemony and modernity.

As mentioned before, the notion of coloniality and its legacies are prevalent in the voluntourism industry, as it is based on colonial power dynamics and knowledge structures. The coloniality of knowledge refers to the historical domination of Western knowledge systems and how they continue to shape the understanding, planning, and development of voluntourism (Wijesinghe, 2020). This has resulted in a limited ability for the colonised to define their own tourism narratives, marginalising their knowledge and reinforcing a sense of inferiority (Mlilo et al., 2024). Power imbalances and inequalities are thus perpetuated by Western-centric tourism models that fail to address the needs of former and current colonised societies and deny their agency (Wijesinghe, 2020). This also ties back to the coloniality of being concerning the dehumanisation of communities and the denial of agency in the development of their environments. Voluntourism marketing narratives and the limited capability to build local narratives misrepresent cultures, destinations, and communities, reinforcing colonial stereotypes and further entrenching power imbalances (Mlilo et. al., 2024). To reduce and ideally eradicate these colonial dynamics, the industry should adopt Mignolo's (2013) strategy of decoloniality and embrace local knowledge systems.

All in all, this collection of decolonial thoughts offers a powerful framework for understanding how colonial patterns of domination persist in contemporary institutions, including international aid, education, and tourism. It calls for a reconsideration of knowledge and power that centres the agency, voices, and knowledge of formerly colonised peoples. In the context of this study, decolonial theory is particularly useful in examining practices such as voluntourism, where intentions to help often replicate colonial hierarchies, erase local agency, and impose Western notions of development and progress.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design

In addressing the research question, this thesis adopts a qualitative approach to explore the complex and context-dependent interactions between volunteering agencies and host communities. The decisions to use qualitative methods are driven by the need to understand the nuanced, subjective experiences, perspectives, and power dynamics involved in these interactions as these elements are difficult to quantify (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative methods serve the in-depth examination of voluntourism as a social phenomenon, allowing the researcher to capture the meanings agencies and volunteers assign to their operations and experiences. Additionally, this approach allows for the exploration of relational dimensions of building trust, negotiating power, and managing expectations, which is critical to understanding the impact of voluntourism operations beyond statistical data. By adopting a qualitative approach, this study aims to not only document current operations but also understand why and how it is organised and impacts host communities. This aligns with the study's objective of contributing to more ethical and mutually-beneficial forms of voluntourism.

This study makes use of semi-structured interviews, as this allows for an in-depth exploration of complex and subjective topics. The combination of guided questions and the space for flexible answers ensures that the key points of the research are covered, but are not limited to this. It allows for follow-up questions, which can add depth to answers and can help to understand certain behaviours or thoughts better (Adams, 2015). This method allows for a discussion of topics outside the scope of the research, potentially generating interest for further research (Adeoye‐Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). However, the amount and quality of collected data

depend on what participants are willing to share. In this light, the interviews explored travel agencies' operations concerning project selection, volunteer recruitment, and project evaluation. In order to gather a more complete and nuanced picture of the setup of volunteering experiences, the perspective of volunteers on how their experience was organised is also included. Interviews with volunteers concerned their application procedure, preparation, and cultural exchange.

The interviews have been conducted with volunteers and representatives of Dutch travel agencies that offer vacations with volunteering as the main activity in the Global South. As for the volunteers, three interviews were conducted with participants from the researchers' network. Furthermore, a total of twenty-two travel agencies were approached, resulting in six interviews being conducted. The interviewees were either owners of the agencies or employed as regional or national coordinators. The participants have been selected by purposive sampling through email addresses found on the agencies' websites, targeting organisations with direct involvement and experience in the field (Creswell, 2009). The targeted agencies offer either only volunteering, or multiple forms of tourism including voluntourism, language schools, au pair experience and group trips. The interviews were conducted in Dutch as this is the first language of both the researcher and the participants. The participating volunteers did not book their experiences through a participating agency, as their agencies were not willing to participate in this study.

For the analysis of the data, the interviews were transcribed and thereafter analysed thematically, using ATLAS.ti helping to identify recurring patterns and key themes related to criticisms and colonial dynamics throughout organisational practices and volunteer experiences. The recurring patterns were coded and organised into overarching themes. The coding was done inductively, meaning that codes and themes were determined by the content of the data rather

than using an imposed framework (Clarke & Braun, 2017). The first codes that emerged were commercial incentives, the preparation and placement of volunteers, the engagement with host communities, benefits for host communities, the awareness of criticisms, and certification iniatives. These codes were then assigned to overarching themes as presented in the findings of this study: incentives, volunteer placement, community involvement, and ethical voluntourism.

The overall research process went quite smoothly without major setbacks. The main challenge was the recruitment of travel agencies, as many did not want to participate or did not respond at all. This could suggest that the participating agencies are among the more ethical ones in the Dutch industry and may be more confident that their operations are conducted ethically. Hence, they were enthusiastically sharing their operations and the ethical issues faced during the interviews, whereas the shared information was also limited to the interviewees' willingness to share. Furthermore, the codes and themes were applied in English, preventing translation challenges. However, the translation of interview questions was more challenging in terms of ensuring that both questions transfer the exact same meaning, leading to the same interpretation and maintaining neutrality.

4.2 Positionality

My position as a researcher influences how I interpret and prioritise aspects of the study. Having personally participated in a voluntourism project in Tanzania, I gained first-hand insight into the dynamics between locals, NGO workers, and volunteers. While locals appeared appreciative of the support, I remain uncertain about how much their voices are included, whether their needs are truly reflected in the projects, and how they genuinely feel about hosting

volunteers. This left me with mixed feelings and doubts about the project's sustainability. At the time, I had limited awareness of the colonial dynamics within voluntourism. I now believe it's crucial to raise awareness about power imbalances, benefits leakage, and the use of unqualified volunteers, so participants can make more informed decisions about joining such projects. My experience contributes both a positive view of cultural exchange and a critical stance toward the structure of these initiatives. Therefore, this research aims not just to critique the voluntourism industry but to highlight areas for improvement to better serve host communities.

As a white, Western, female researcher, I am studying complex issues of cultural exchange, race, and colonial legacies, topics that are particularly sensitive given my background from a historically colonising nation. Having not experienced colonialism or its ongoing impacts, I was born with privileges that many in host communities do not share, including freedom from racial or national discrimination and the ability to travel to Tanzania. These privileges limit my understanding of how coloniality is experienced by those from formerly colonised societies. Nonetheless, I aim to educate myself on non-Western perspectives to ensure they are at least partially represented, even as the research focuses on Western institutions. Additionally, my gender influenced both my interactions with the host community and my views on how voluntourism should engage with them.

4.3 Ethical considerations

Informed consent is vital to ethical research, ensuring autonomy, trust, and protection for participants (Kadam, 2017). All participants received detailed information about the study's

purpose, methods, and risks. Written consent confirmed their voluntary participation, with the right to withdraw at any time. Efforts were made to minimise discomfort, allowing participants to skip questions or leave interviews.

Anonymity and confidentiality foster trust and honest responses by protecting privacy and sensitive data (Creswell, 2009). Interview recordings and transcripts were securely stored on a password-protected laptop accessible only to the primary researcher, though the supervisor contributed to data analysis and writing. Agencies were anonymised with numerical labels, and no identifiable information was disclosed.

Cultural sensitivity is essential when researching communities different from the researcher's, promoting respect, trust, and relevance (Creswell, 2009). Though the researcher and participants shared Western backgrounds, cultural awareness was maintained through the use of non-colonising language, inclusion of non-Western scholars, and neutral, assumption-free questioning.

This study received ethical approval and followed the University of Groningen's ethical guidelines.

5. Findings

5.1 Incentives: Profit and impact

The voluntourism industry is characterised by the many different volunteering agencies offering experiences in various destinations, as demonstrated in Table 1, displaying the forms of

tourism organised, the destinations currently on offer, and the nature of the agencies. As the table demonstrates, the agencies' business setups and motivations differ significantly, influencing how they position themselves within the industry and towards stakeholders. Where some are operating with their main goal being profit, others prioritise impact without profit. Among the participating agencies, the companies' legal forms already demonstrate clear differences in their main goals. Agencies 6 and 7 clearly expressed that they are foundations and thus do not make a profit. Moreover, they stated they are not travel agencies as they do not sell volunteering experiences; they rather facilitate the connection between volunteers and local projects through donations and sponsorship contributions gathered by the volunteers themselves. These agencies depart from the desire to help and make an impact, as agency 7 stated it was founded in the post-war period in Europe to rebuild, improve living conditions for refugees, and foster understanding and cooperation.

On the other hand, the commercial nature of the other agencies' operations still varies. Agency 5 offers a limited number of destinations in Africa, and does not ask a participation fee, its prices only cover its guidance and accommodation. Agency 3, even though a commercial agency, offers only one destination to potential volunteers and generally sends fewer volunteers. Whereas, agencies 1, 2, and 4 offer experiences in a wide variety of destinations, generally sending more volunteers, while also offering other tourism experiences besides volunteering. Agency 1 also emphasised the possible commercial nature of the industry, stating that they earn money from it, but locals as well, through volunteer dorms and local guidance.

Table 1 - Characteristics participating agencies

	Forms of tourism	Destinations	Type of organisation
Agency 1	Volunteering, Au Pair, High School, Language Schools	Southeast Asia, Africa, Latin America	Commercial
Agency 2	Volunteering, Backpacking, High School, Au Pair	Southeast Asia (5), South Africa, Zambia, Suriname, Costa Rica, Cuba	Commercial
Agency 3	Volunteering, Internships	Ghana	Semi-commercial
Agency 4	Volunteering, Internships, Travel tours	Southeast Asia (13), Mauritius	Commercial
Agency 5	Volunteering, Internships	Kenya, Malawi,Uganda	Semi-commercial
Agency 6	Volunteering	Africa (6), South America (4), Bangladesh, Romania	Non-profit
Agency 7	Volunteering	Europe , Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, Nepal	Non-profit

The participating volunteers reported experiencing multiple shortcomings, confirming the commercial nature of voluntourism, prioritising their experience over the host community's. Table 2 portrays the nature of the volunteers' experiences, demonstrating short-term volunteer-oriented experiences. Firstly, some agencies in the industry include volunteering activities that appeal to volunteers or even set up projects just to place volunteers. Volunteer 1 mentioned her volunteering experience included one day of teaching at the local school of which she felt was included to please volunteers, as it did not allow them to have a meaningful contribution to the children's education. Furthermore, the marketing of projects is often focused on the fun activities, masking the more challenging tasks as experienced by volunteer 2. Moreover, volunteer 3 participated in an experience at a monastery that lacked a demand for

labour. She also mentioned receiving a scarf from the children, feeling a bit forced to appeal to volunteers' sentiments.

"We hadden niet een plan wat we gingen volgen. Het was meer van, oh, jij kan dit vandaag doen, kan jij dat vandaag schoonmaken? En als we met te veel mensen waren, want we waren eigenlijk ook gewoon extra. Ja, dan ging je gewoon wat gezelligs doen met de kinderen, een spelletje of een beetje Engelse woordjes leren. Ik denk niet dat wij echt heel erg blijvende indrukken hebben achtergelaten."

"We did not have a plan to follow, it was more like, you can do this today, and you can clean that. When we were with too many, we were just extra, we would just do something fun with the kids, play a game or teach them some English words. I do not think we had a lasting impact." - Volunteer 3

Table 2 - Characteristics participating volunteers

	Destination	Type of work	Duration	Age	Nationality	Gender
Volunteer 1	Tanzania	Construction & agriculture	2 weeks	25	Dutch	Female
Volunteer 2	Costa Rica	Wildlife protection	2 weeks	22	Belgian	Female
Volunteer 3	Nepal	Housekeeping & teaching at monastery	2,5 weeks	17	Dutch	Female

The participating agencies also demonstrated being mainly concerned about the experience of their volunteers. Throughout the interview, agency 1 was very much oriented

towards the volunteer side of the operations, expressing little about local contexts. Other agencies also mentioned practices implying they focus on ensuring a fun experience for volunteers. Agencies 1, 2, and 4 advise volunteers to apply for projects they think are the best match. These advices tend to focus on activities outside volunteering, steering towards the destinations that are often visited to encourage social events among the volunteers. Additionally, they require adequate conditions in terms of accommodation and leisure activities for the volunteers; the positive contribution should not be at the expense of the volunteers.

Agency 3 explained that its focus shifted when the need to make a profit disappeared. Due to the abundance of accessible funds coming from a rich NGO owner covering the costs, attracting volunteers is no longer the main focus; all funding rather goes towards local projects. Contrarily, other agencies focus on attracting and placing more volunteers, demonstrating their desire for profit. Agency 4 mentioned exploring a new travel format for minors that also includes volunteering, expanding their volunteering network. Agency 1 mentioned it is searching for new strategies to recruit more volunteers and to reconsider its local partners to increase placement opportunities.

"Ik ben zelf ook voornemens om met een aantal partners te stoppen, niet omdat die slecht werk leveren, maar omdat onze grote partners ook op die plekken projecten aanbieden en doordat ik met minder partners contact heb stuur ik naar de partners waar we wel meewerken meer vrijwilligers toe, daar worden zijn ook blij van en gaan ze ook meer ons promoten."

'"I am planning to cut ties with some smaller partners, not because their work is bad, but because our big partner also offers projects there. Because I am in contact with fewer partners, I can send more volunteers to the partners we do work with, which makes them happy, and they promote us more." - Agency 1

5.2 Volunteer placement: requirements and preparation

Volunteer placement is central to the work of volunteering agencies, with varying but overlapping requirements to ensure appropriate placement. As shown in Table 3, which portrays all requirements for participation employed by the agencies and experienced by volunteers. These include prior experience or education, orientation meetings, and application forms addressing motivations and preferences. Common criteria also involve a certificate of conduct, minimum age limits of usually 18 and sometimes 21, and pre-departure training. In this study, a few agencies require a health certificate or proof of language proficiency for Spanish-speaking countries, ensuring adequate physical and linguistic capacity.

Table 3 - Volunteer placement requirements

	Experience/ education	Certificate of Conduct	Orientation meeting	Minimum age	Minimum duration of 4 weeks	Preparation training	Application form	Language proficiency	Health certificate
Agency 1								N/A	
Agency 2									
Agency 3								N/A	
Agency 4									
Agency 5								N/A	
Agency 6								N/A	
Agency 7								N/A	
Volunteer 1								N/A	
Volunteer 2									
Volunteer 3								N/A	

One exception to these requirements is the health care placements. The strict requirements and extensive preparation for placements in the health care sector stand out compared to other sectors. All agencies offering health care placements demand experience and educational backgrounds in this sector, ensuring specialised volunteers, while placements in other sectors are less selective. Volunteer 1 shared that their project had to be deconstructed and rebuilt due to an error by inexperienced volunteers. As shown in the table, only agency 5 requires experience for all projects it offers, stating it is very selective and sometimes even rejects applications. Agency 7, however, accounts for their inexperienced volunteers by placing them in low-skill construction activities supervised by local construction professionals. Agencies 2, 3, and 5 also value local professionals, emphasising that volunteers should never displace local labour. They argue that volunteers should not replace a local paid employee; they should rather assist them with tasks they would otherwise lack time and labour force for.

Table 1 also demonstrates the absence of strict age limits for 5 out of 10 participants. Besides the legal benefits of employing volunteers aged 18 and older, most agencies consider this to be the age at which volunteers are independent and socially and mentally mature enough to engage in a volunteering experience. Nevertheless, other agencies do not consider these character traits inherent to age.

"Ik heb wel mensen van 25 of 30 gehad die er bijna niet klaar voor waren om zo'n ervaring op te doen. En ik heb wel 16-18 jarigen gehad voor wie het een speeltaal was. Dus meer een soort van persoonlijke zelfstandigheid, hoe je in het leven staat, die belangrijk is dan de fysieke leeftijd."

"I have had people aged 25 or 30 who were not really ready to engage in such an experience, while it was a walk in the park for some volunteers aged 16 or 17. So it is more about a sense of personal independence and world vision that's important rather than physical age." - Agency 3

A common practice among the agencies, except for two, is the organisation of a pre-departure training period. The content and extensiveness of this preparation training differ from merely providing practical travel information, like agency 1 and volunteer 2 experienced, to elaborate cultural education. Agency 4 gives informational training about culture shock, reverse culture shock, impact tips, and dos and don'ts. Agency 3 stated its training focused on bridging the cultural gap with an intercultural trainer and role plays. Moreover, agencies 5 and 7 educate their volunteers on culturally appropriate behaviour, emphasising open-mindedness and flexibility, and encouraging relationships based on respect and equality.

Along these lines of cultural engagement and understanding, some agencies emphasise the importance of long-term voluntourism. Whereas some agencies offer experiences of only one or two weeks, other agencies heavily criticise this approach. Agency 5 mentioned a minimum duration of four weeks, considering that volunteers need time to get used to the circumstances and the culture. Agency 2 added the importance of the continuity of projects. Agency 3 expressed the potential harm of short-term placements, as these tend to reinforce stereotypes and prejudices rather than deconstruct them, because volunteers do not have enough time to learn and understand the culture. Volunteer 1 experienced this lack of cultural understanding since she lost assumptions related to the hospitality of locals to maintain volunteer influx after having visited multiple African countries and staying for a longer period. Moreover, volunteers 1 and 3 felt that their impact was limited because of their short-term stay.

5.3 Community involvement: local partners, agency and evaluation

To facilitate the placement of volunteers, all agencies cooperate with local partner organisations. All agencies mentioned working with local partners, considering their experience with local contexts. These partners range from local volunteering agencies to NGOs, and from local governments to community-based organisations (CBOs). Agencies 1, 2 and 4 expressed that they cooperate with similar volunteering agencies at their destinations. Agency 7, on the other hand, cooperates with different kinds of organisations as long as they are non-profit organisations. The projects of agencies 3 and 4, and volunteers 1 and 3 were organised in cooperation with foundations and NGOs. Strikingly, the owners of these organisations are Europeans, similarly to the NGOs agency 4 cooperates with. The representative stated that this

often concerns Westerners who have visited once and stayed, thinking they could make a change. Contrarily, agency 6 works with the health and education department of the local districts, either directly or through partner organisations. Agency 5 adopts a more local approach as well, working with locally-owned NGOs or community-based organisations.

"Alle onze projecten zijn lokale projecten. En de voorwaarde is dat alle projecten zijn een eigen NGO of CBO. Dus een non-governmental organization of een community-based organization. Dus zij hebben hun eigen entiteit. Zij hebben hun eigen missie en visie. Ze hebben hun eigen plan. Wij zijn ook niet degene die bepalen wat zij gaan doen. Dus wij varen op hun behoeften en vragen wat zij nodig hebben en waar wij kunnen helpen."

"All our projects are local projects; we require projects to be local NGOs or CBOs. So they have their own entity, their own mission and vision. They have their own plan. We are not the ones deciding what work is done. We are operating on their needs, asking what they need and where we can help." - Agency 5

Most agencies emphasise that the placement of volunteers needs to originate from a demand from the local community, however, the way they act on this approach differs. Firstly, agency 1 completely shifts the responsibility to engage with local communities to its partner organisations. Agencies 2 and 4 both rely on the projects offered by their partners, nevertheless, they stated they carefully select what partners they work with as they value projects that act on needs identified by the community. Agency 4 added that they require partners to have obtained particular certifications, ensuring ethical practices. The operations of the agency thus

demonstrate that they mainly depart from local demand, however, the extent to which they are involved in the design of projects is unclear. Agencies 5, 6, and 7 use an approach that engages with local communities on a deeper level. For instance, agency 5 focuses on local autonomy, stating that projects choose to cooperate with them based on their own needs and vision, as the agency does not design the program. Agency 6 and 7 use a similar approach, as they only partake in construction activities they ask to build what the community needs. Where agency 7 uses an application form that already designed projects can fill out, asking for volunteers, agency 6 discusses local needs with districts and uses a predetermined blueprint for the classrooms, clinics or dorms they build. Agency 3 has a unique position, due to the trustful relationship with and the abundance of funding from the partner, it can freely operate and set up projects. The agency acknowledges that consulting the community is now even more important as there is a thin line between imposing its own ideas and thus reinforcing the colonial hierarchy rather than actually representing the needs of the community.

"Dan hebben we een applicatieformulier, wat ingevuld kan worden, maar ook heel duidelijk staat aangegeven van, dat het een project moet zijn dat niet winstgevend is, geschikt voor onervaren vrijwilligers, en duurzaam zijn. Er staat ook in dat we niet het project aan zich financieren, maar wel handjes leveren en eventueel een kleine bijdrage kunnen doen aan materialen. Die kunnen organisaties dan opsturen en dan kijk ik naar de haalbaarheid."

"So on our website, we have an application form that can be filled out, which clearly states the requirements of being non-profit, accessible to unskilled volunteers, and sustainable. It also states the project is not funded by us, but we can offer some helping hands and a little

contribution for materials. Then organisations can apply and we review whether the project is feasible for us." - Agency 7

Furthermore, multiple agencies indicated that their interaction with host communities results in employment opportunities within the local communities. Especially, since many agencies work with volunteer dorms that require domestic workers to cook and clean. The majority of projects also employ local guides and sometimes local professionals in their field to supervise the volunteers. Besides financial opportunities, the participants mentioned additional successes of their projects. Agency 4 shared improvements in the conditions of disabled children as their projects offered daycare and physical therapy, resulting in an eleven-year-old boy learning to walk. Furthermore, agency 2 mentioned improved entry levels into elementary school through a community kindergarten project, a form of education, these poorest class children would otherwise not have had access to. Nevertheless, agency 3 emphasised a negative impact of voluntourism interactions concerning the perpetuation of knowledge hierarchies and stereotypes.

"Want alles wat wij doen. Dat heeft die lelijke neveneffecten. Je merkt het ook als je met ze praat. Dat Afrikanen gewoon tegen je kunnen zeggen. Jullie zijn zoveel slimmer. Jullie hebben het allemaal zoveel beter voor elkaar. Het zal wel in de genen zitten. Dat zeggen ze soms letterlijk. Dus dat een soort van minderwaardigheidscomplex zit ingebakken. En als je niet oppast. Dan versterk je dat alleen maar."

"Because everything we do has these ugly side effects. You notice it when you are speaking to them. That Africans can just say, you're so much smarter, you have things arranged so much

better, it must be in the genes. They literally say that sometimes, like a kind of inferiority complex is instilled. And if you're not careful, you're actually reinforcing it." - Agency 3

A significant part of adequate project management is evaluation to understand the impact of the projects on the community and potential improvements. In terms of evaluation, agency 1 again puts the responsibility on its partners, expecting to be notified in case of any issues. The other agencies seem to engage more with their partners for the projects and cooperation evaluation. Agency 2 has annual evaluation meetings with partners, agency 4 stays in contact daily, while agency 7 produces a report based on evaluations by volunteers to discuss with their partners annually. Furthermore, agency 5 evaluates every placement of each volunteer with their partners. Agency 3 adopts a different approach by speaking with local chiefs, head nurses, and teachers, however, the agency only operates at one destination, making it easier to form personal connections and speak regularly. Moreover, agency 6 adopts an even more inclusive approach, organising annual meetings with stakeholders such as employees from schools and clinics, parents, patients, and community leaders.

5.4 Ethical voluntourism: sensitivities and certification

Within the industry, there is awareness about the risks and criticisms associated with voluntourism. Throughout the interviews, some agencies identified problematic operations and the general sensitivity of offering these experiences in the Global South. Firstly, agency 7 and volunteer 2 denounce the sometimes over-commercialised nature of the industry. The agency 2 mentioned how sometimes projects get continuously built and deconstructed to maintain

activities and thus sustain volunteer flows and income. Agency 5 also recognised this issue and highlighted that they withdraw from projects if volunteers are not adding value anymore or when the local population can completely take over the activities. Consequently, these issues were identified by agency 4 as their main struggle, as it is sometimes complicated to assess whether a project is ethical, sustainable, and has a positive impact. Additionally, agency 7 mentioned being approached by many different projects for cooperation, again emphasising the challenge of selecting ethical partners. However, agencies 2 and 3 made contradicting statements concerning volunteering motives. Whereas they emphasise to their volunteers it is naive to think they can be saviours and change the world, they also encourage volunteers to participate for their personal growth.

As a result of the industry's awareness, multiple frameworks and guidelines have been developed, not only by critical external actors but also on a national level by certain critical agencies. Firstly, Volunteer Correct was an association of 13 Dutch organisations operating in the voluntourism industry, aiming to transform the industry to be transparent, responsible, and ethical by issuing certain quality guidelines to challenge the criticism. However, this association ceased to exist as the founding organisations felt that the guidelines became more of a marketing tool to appeal to volunteers rather than a framework to ensure ethical volunteering. Consequently, some founding organisations launched a different platform called Volunteer Aware, which scores agencies based on their transparency index. This index assesses agencies' operations concerning their mission and profiling, responsiveness, finances, partners and organisational processes to provide transparent information and raise awareness about

malpractices for volunteers, allowing them to consciously choose the best option for them (*Volunteer Aware*, n.d.).

Even though the awareness about malpractices is high among the agencies and within the industry, agencies 3 and 7 highlight the continuous sensitivity of voluntourism despite the ethical guidelines. Focusing on the unreciprocal nature of voluntourism agency 7, expressed exploring opportunities for more Global South to Global North volunteering rather than only North to South to encourage more equal relations. Additionally, agency 3 stated that in this sense, colonialism never stopped, as they might have their independence, their governments and their territory, but they are still subject to the commerce from the North.

"Want het blijft natuurlijk wel de hypergevoeligheid van het internationaal vrijwilligerswerk. Het is niet wederkerig. Wij gaan daar naartoe en zij komen niet hier naartoe. Alleen dat is voor sommige mensen al reden om te denken. Je moet dat helemaal niet doen. En dat begrijp ik. Ze moeten zelf hun onderwijs opbouwen. En zelf dat zelf vorm geven. Zonder onze invloed. Maar goed, in een ideale wereld heb je gelijkwaardigheid en een vergelijkbare situatie. Waardoor het alleen maar neerkomt op het opdoen van ervaring in een andere cultuur. Maar het is natuurlijk niet alleen maar die andere culturen. Het is ook armoede en rijkdom. Wij gaan daar heen en zij kunnen niet hierheen."

"Because it does, of course, remain the hypersensitivity of international volunteering. It is not reciprocal. We go there and they don't come here. That alone is reason enough for some people to think. You shouldn't do that at all. And I understand that. They have to build their education

themselves. And design that themselves. Without our influence. But anyway, in an ideal world, you have equality and a similar situation. Which only makes it come down to gaining experience in another culture. But of course, it's not just those different cultures. It's also poverty and wealth. We go there and they can't come here." - Agency 3

6. Discussion

6.1 Criticisms in practice

The criticisms associated with voluntourism are prevalent in the actual day-to-day practice through the operations of volunteering agencies. It needs to be said that the operations differ a lot among the participants, and therefore, the degree to which the criticisms apply to their interactions with host communities as well.

One of the criticisms is the commodification of poverty and altruism by offering feel-good narratives of saviourism that appeal to volunteers' emotions, resulting in agencies prioritising volunteer experiences while marginalising local needs and contexts (Mostafanezhad, 2014; Sin, 2009). This commodified framing is reflected in the agencies, as multiple agencies mentioned encouraging volunteers to consider their personal development as motivation. Besides the commodification of altruism, the general commercial impetus also leads to the volunteer experience being the main focus. Considering 5 out of 7 agencies have a commercial legal form, they are likely to, not necessarily prioritise, but at least heavily focus on attracting and appealing

to volunteers. During the interviews, evidence was found that some agencies indeed focus on ensuring a fun experience by steering towards projects with more social events and requiring comfortable conditions. Additionally, agency 1 and 4 highlighted their desire to attract and place more volunteers through building bigger partnerships and offering new travel forms, including volunteering, again proving this commercial mindset. Moreover, the volunteer participants all mentioned experiencing this strategy to appeal to them in terms of included activities, unrealistic marketing, and even an experience that seemed to be organised merely to send volunteers. The operations of some agencies or parts of their operations thus demonstrate this focus on the volunteer experience. This leads to less engagement with locals on their perspective about designing the projects in their community (Wearing & McGehee, 2013). This market-driven approach is concerning, particularly when local needs and knowledge are not the basis on which these projects are built.

Another element of the operations sensitive to little local involvement is the cooperation with similar volunteering agencies at the destinations. As these organisations are also commercial and focused on attracting many volunteers, they are likely to maintain a commercial mindset and prioritise volunteers' needs. Nevertheless, cooperating with NGOs does not automatically result in more host community involvement, as many NGOs have Western owners, proving MacNeill's (2017) argument of Western companies dominating the industry. This can possibly be explained by the desire to cooperate with partners operating ethically; the NGOs with Western owners are likely to align closer with the agencies' ethical norms and values. However, they tend to hire more locals and thus have a less Western lens, although it is still not completely

local and even less from the host communities. Consequently, Western needs and ideas remain the main influence.

This spills over to the involvement of host communities in the evaluation processes. Where agency 1 only evaluates its projects with its volunteers, others regularly evaluate projects with their partners. The extent to which communities are involved is not really clear, but considering these evaluations are often results and numbers-oriented (Grabowski et al., 2021), they tend to disregard local input or at least fail to address complex social impacts. This overall limited involvement denies the agency of local communities to decide and act on their own development, since they have no voice in how their community is represented and worked with (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mlilo et. al., 2024).

The issue of short-term placements of often unskilled labour is also related to the prioritisation of volunteers and marginalisation of local communities (Guttentag, 2009). This starts with the idea that inexperienced volunteers have the capacity to transform local contexts with limited knowledge of local structures and deeper socioeconomic challenges (Loiseau et. al., 2016). This study, however, proves that a lack of expertise results in inefficient and substandard outcomes, as Volunteer 1 shared that her project had to be partially deconstructed due to a construction defect. Together with Volunteer 3, she felt their contribution was limited because of their short-term placements. Furthermore, most agencies do not require any experience for their projects, aside from the medical field, thus likely risking an outcome that is substandard for the project and potentially unsatisfactory for both the community and volunteers (Loiseau et al., 2016).

Besides the unskilled and short-term placements resulting in low-quality results for the communities, it also causes issues on the cultural level due to a limited time to build mutual understanding (Raymond & Hall, 2008). Agency 3 mentioned how short stays tend to reinforce assumptions and stereotypes rather than deconstruct them because volunteers cannot properly understand cultural norms, values and structures in a short timeframe. Moreover, the agency mentioned an instilled sense of inferiority of host communities due to the epistemological and cultural domination by the West. Furthermore, Volunteer 1 confirmed this by sharing how her assumptions about locals being hospitable to maintain tourist flows changed when she spent more time in another African country. These experiences prove that short-term placement reinforces stereotypes and the depiction of local communities as helpless and dependent (Guttentag, 2009).

As Wearing and McGehee (2013) argue, the abovementioned operations reinforce Western dominance in decision-making and disregard local input. As a result, projects are misaligned with local needs and downplay local contexts to merely poor living conditions without challenging structural issues and benefiting host communities to be exploited for Western gain. Moreover, the limited involvement denies local communities' agency over their representation and development (Wijesinghe, 2020). Reflecting the perpetuation of colonial structures by catering to Western needs and valuing Western knowledge, rather than local demand and expertise. Hence, current operations demonstrate that the coloniality of knowledge needs to be challenged more, and the industry should move away from its Western, and especially volunteer-oriented, practices to include more local expertise and knowledge (Mignolo,

2007). Similarly, these operations perpetuate the coloniality of being by denying local communities the agency over their own being and development (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Overall, it highlights how poorly organised projects or aspects of them are still perpetuating colonial hierarchies in the modern voluntourism industry.

The commodification of altruism and local contexts, the prioritising of the volunteer experience, and the short-term duration of placements interact negatively with perceptions of local communities and their perceptions about themselves. As they feel forced to perform their culture attractively to volunteers and stereotypes are reinforced, denying their agency over their representation (Mostafanezhad, 2014). This relates to Maldondado-Torres' (2007) coloniality of being as local communities are dehumanised to be exploited for voluntourism experiences that cater to Western volunteers. Moreover, the little involvement in project design and evaluation, and imposed unskilled labour demonstrate that colonial hierarchies of knowledge are perpetuated (Mignolo, 2007). The prioritisation of Western knowledge and unskilled labour implies the inferiority of local epistemologies and capacities. Consequently, projects are misaligned with their needs and traditions as they are overlooked (Mostafanezhad, 2014). These interactions reinforce the sense of inferiority of local communities and affect their perceptions about themselves and their capacities. The limited involvement of local communities also denies agency over their own development, again perpetuating coloniality of being (Wijesinghe, 2020). Lastly, in terms of economic interaction, the domination of Western actors likely indicates leakages of revenue, thus limiting economic benefits (MacNeill, 2017).

6.2 Towards ethical voluntourism

Fortunately, the study has revealed many positive practices that move toward more ethical forms of engagement, mitigating criticisms and Western dominance. As a result of the awareness of the problematic nature of traditional voluntourism practices, some critical agencies advocate for industry reform based on transparency and equal relations. The striking thing that characterises these critical agencies is the non-profit attitude. Evidently, this affects the marketing narrative of their experiences, as they do not rely on saviour and helplessness profiling to attract large amounts of volunteers. The previous Volunteer Correct Association, created by some of these agencies, reflects this stance against patriarchal profiling in voluntourism marketing. The current Volunteer Aware platform also assesses agencies on this problematic profiling, thus aiming to eradicate it from the industry. Additionally, agencies 2 and 3 emphasise the naivety of being the saviour to their volunteers.

Furthermore, an important step toward more equal and ethical voluntourism is a pre-departure training that engages volunteers ethically and reflectively, forcing them to consider their privilege, cultural humility and colonial structures (Tiessen & Heron, 2012). While some agencies offer limited training reduced to merely logistical information, others invest more deeply in cultural orientation. Agency 5 includes training on cultural shock, impact awareness, and ethical behaviour, and agency 7 promotes respectful and equitable relationship-building. Agency 3 even employs intercultural trainers and uses role-plays to confront stereotypes and build awareness about colonial hierarchies, considered a vital element of Tiessen & Heron's (2012) cultural education.

Maingi & Gowreesunkar (2024) argue that awareness about inequalities and injustices can deconstruct assumptions, besides the pre-departure training, long-term placements encourage the deconstruction of prejudices as recognised by agency 3. The deconstruction of stereotypes and assumptions again breaks down the dehumanisation of local communities, returning their dignity and chance at relationships based on equality (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). In terms of placement duration, most agencies criticise short-term volunteering due to their lack of impact, as volunteers 1 and 3 experienced. Hence, agencies 2, 3, and 5 implemented a minimum duration of four weeks, often extended for medical projects.

As a result, the coloniality of being is challenged by moving toward a humanised and equal portrayal of local communities rather than belittling them (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Vrasti, 2012). This allows for more positive social interactions in which community agency and self-determination are promoted, enhancing self-esteem and breaking down the sense of inferiority (Mlilo et al., 2024). Additionally, assumptions are deconstructed and mutual understanding is fostered, allowing communities to perform their culture according to their wishes rather than appealing to volunteers. Consequently, the abovementioned interactions with voluntourism have less impact on community traditions, dynamics and tensions as they do not commodify the local contexts (McGehee & Andereck, 2009).

Another good practice concerning medical placements is the strict education and experience requirements that all agencies enforce. However, in other sectors, only agency 5 requires verifiable experience and education, whereas agency 3 discusses experience in orientation meetings. Moreover, agencies 2, 3, and 5 explicitly reject the displacement of local labour, requiring volunteers to take on assisting roles rather than replace community workers. This commitment indicates an awareness of and response to the critique that volunteer

placements can undermine local expertise and economies (Vo, 2024). The operations concerning volunteer placement thus limitedly challenge the coloniality of knowledge as measures to reduce unskilled Western labour and include more local expertise are still unsatisfactory (Mignolo, 2007).

The most straightforward pathway to decolonial voluntourism is the greater inclusion of local needs, labour, expertise, and representation (Perold et al., 2013). Even though all agencies stated that volunteers need to be placed based on demand from local communities, only some agencies demonstrate clear practices increasing community agency and involvement. Agency 5, for instance, works exclusively with locally owned NGOs or CBOs, ensuring that projects are grounded in community priorities rather than externally imposed ideas. Similarly, agency 6 consults with local education and healthcare departments and community leaders to request their needs for construction projects. Agency 7 adopts a similar approach, as they ask their partners what construction projects they need and the number of volunteers required to realise the project. These agencies emphasise that local projects choose to work with them rather than imposing their plans, and that volunteers work under the supervision of local professionals.

Moreover, some agencies adopt a more inclusive approach in their evaluation as well. Agency 3 uses a personal approach, directly speaking with chiefs, head teachers and nurses. Agency 6, for example, brings together local stakeholders to assess the social and practical impacts of its projects. These inclusive approaches contrast with top-down evaluations based on volunteer satisfaction and reflect a move toward decolonial, community-led metrics of success (Baillie Smith & Laurie, 2011). These approaches reflect a shift toward decolonial practices that

honour the autonomy and expertise of local communities, thus encouraging pluriversality (Escobar, 2018).

The increased input from locals in the project design and evaluation, and employment of local professionals rather than unskilled volunteers, indicates that local knowledge and capacities are valued more, thus partially breaking down Mignolo's (2007) coloniality of knowledge. Additionally, economic interaction takes a positive turn as community-driven projects are likely to employ local professionals and businesses, while also ensuring the projects are based on local capacities structurally available for contemporary and future income generation. This returns the agency over development in the Global South to the local communities, thus challenging the coloniality of being (Maldonado-Torres, 2007).

6.3 Further transformation

The combination of the criticisms in practice and current decolonial efforts demonstrates what practices are insufficiently mitigated. The industry seems to have made significant progress in terms of decoloniality of being by mitigating belittling marketing, cultural engagement training, and long-term placements. However, there is still room for improvement. In terms of equal existence and granting agency over their own being, agencies can include Mahrouse's (2014) suggestion to require informed consent from local communities related to photographs and stories. This would guarantee local control over their portrayal and representations, and further decompose coloniality of being (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). This type of interaction

would stimulate relationships based on equality and stimulate positive perceptions of and for local communities and their capacities (Guttentag, 2009).

Even though commercial agencies are ethically oriented, volunteer satisfaction often remains a central operational concern. The pressure to attract and retain volunteers means that community needs can become a secondary focus. Agency 1's decision to manage partnerships based on volunteer numbers demonstrates this persistent tension. A genuine shift away from volunteer-centricity requires resisting the commodification of aid and prioritising models based on solidarity, not charity (Mahrouse, 2014). For instance, agency 5's model could be the norm where volunteers only pay for accommodation, food, and guidance, while the volunteering agency merely breaks even. In the long term, this type of interaction could promote economic opportunities resulting from provided sustainable infrastructure and investments in community education and healthcare (Raymond & Hall, 2008; Palacios, 2010).

Despite some agencies' efforts to involve communities, most agencies still rely on local partners for project design, volunteer placement, and evaluation criteria. For instance, agencies 1, 2, and 4 select projects offered by partners, while it remains unclear how much agency local communities have in setting the agenda. This also applies to the evaluation, where only some agencies aim to include locals, and others merely evaluate with the partner organisations. As suggested by Baillie Smith & Laurie (2011), evaluation methods should take a more social metric focusing on local capacities, ownership, and social equality. A more transformative model requires local actors to lead in defining goals, timelines, and desired outcomes (Perold et al., 2013). Additionally, even the agencies adopting more inclusive approaches are confronted with local hierarchies and potential corruption, especially in governmental departments. Hence, local needs might be represented, but not necessarily the needs of the specific community.

As noted by agencies 3 and 7, the unidirectional flow of volunteers from the Global North to the Global South remains a major concern. This one-way movement reproduces global inequalities and reinforces the coloniality of power (Quijano, 2000). Developing reciprocal programs, such as enabling Global South participants to engage in voluntourism abroad, could contribute to more equal relationships and challenge systemic barriers to mobility. The effort of agency 7 to explore two-directional volunteering should be supported by the entire industry as it decomposes colonial hierarchies and fosters equal relationships in knowledge sharing (Mignolo, 2007) and in equal existence (Maldonado-Torres, 2007).

The operations of the agencies for medical placements should serve as an example for the entire industry. The medical field of voluntourism requires experience, education, long-term placement, and adequate preparation. If these operations are expanded to all fields in the industry, they offer the conditions needed for voluntourism based on equality, mutual learning, and sustainable contributions.

7. Conclusion

This thesis has critically examined the operations of voluntourism agencies in light of persistent criticisms and colonial underpinnings concerning commodification, unequal power dynamics, and the marginalisation of host communities. All in all, this research found many differences in operations between the participants and thus differing degrees of interaction with

local communities. The findings reveal that the literature's criticisms are prevalent in the daily practices of agencies, especially those driven by commercial incentives. The prioritisation of volunteer experiences often results in low-quality and unsustainable solutions with limited community involvement, rather reinforcing colonial structures of knowledge, being, and power that affect communities both socially and economically.

On the other hand, this study also found many good practices already existing in the current voluntourism industry; these operations are, however, often limited to a certain number of agencies, particularly those operating as non-profits. These agencies have made significant efforts to challenge the colonial underpinnings of traditional voluntourism, including rejecting saviour narratives, offering pre-departure cultural training, requiring longer placements, and actively involving local communities in project design and evaluation. Such practices demonstrate the possibility of ethical voluntourism models grounded in equality, humility, and local agency. Within the voluntourism industry, it is thus a matter of certain agencies aiming to challenge the negative impacts and problematic structures, whereas others consider it a profitable business.

This indicates that the interactions of Dutch agencies' operations with host communities differ per agency, partner organisation, and context. In terms of economic interaction, non-profit voluntourism provides little direct income for communities, however, it is more likely to stimulate structural income opportunities. The more commercial branch potentially allows for more direct income, depending on the amount of financial leakage to the West. On the social side of interactions, belittling narratives have been eradicated, but belittling practices persist through

commodified contexts and hierarchies in knowledge and decision-making. The interactions between voluntourism operations and host communities need to move away from volunteer-centric approaches and should rather incorporate local demand, expertise, and agency.

These findings have significant implications both practically and ethically. By implementing the decolonial strategies, agencies can transform their practice to actually serve their purpose of enhancing local capacities and contexts. Moreover, it contributes to higher ethical standards for the industry, encouraging transparency, cultural sensitivity and locally initiated projects.

Despite a carefully designed methodology, the study faced limitations. Data relied on participants' willingness to share, which may have led to an emphasis on positive practices while overlooking more controversial ones. Volunteers, drawn from the researcher's network, might have expressed critical views to align with perceived expectations. A key limitation is the absence of host community voices, which contrasts with the study's aim of exploring their greater involvement. Time and resource constraints made it unfeasible to include and build trust with local participants.

Hence, the local perspective of voluntourism would be an interesting point for further research. Moreover, the instilled insecurity in host communities stemming from interactions dominated by Western epistemologies requires further research. Considering that voluntourism can reinforce this insecurity, while it is meant to empower local communities, it is important to explore how this inferiority complex can be challenged. Lastly, to transform voluntourism into a

completely equal industry, the possibilities of South-to-North volunteering would be an interesting direction to investigate.

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