

Travelers' Philanthropy Conference

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Workshop 13. "Material Donations: Pros, Cons, Best Practices"

Stuff or Money - what's the best way to help

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Travelers enjoy identifying practical ways they can help. The giving of material items such as clothing, books, medical items, school supplies, computers - can be a useful way to help, or it can be totally counterproductive causing major problems for the beneficiary communities. This presentation will expose some of the traps of misguided good intentions, sharing several examples, and will suggest the best options for assistance - number one being to never send stuff that hasn't been requested!

In looking at how much the 'giving' is for the benefit of the traveler and how much is it for the local community, one way to do this is to think of the donation going to the local group anonymously and not being physically given during the visit. Are the travelers still up for doing this? Or is it that they want to experience the song and dance that often comes when handing over items? How does one feel when they are told that the best thing would be to give funds to an organization who will go out and purchase needed items locally. Upon self-examination, one may find that it's often more about the traveler than the community. But there can be some middle ground so that with good guidance and understanding of the situation at hand, the enthusiasm and good intentions of the traveler can stay intact.

In preparation of the 'Dos and Don'ts of Travel Giving' guide in conjunction with CREST, several travel professionals gave their views. There were some differing ideas but overall it was agreed that when, how and what to contribute needs to be determined by the host community or local charitable organisation, rather than by the tourists or the tourism company. The idea that 'we know what you need and we're going to give it to you' without consultation, reeks of colonialism and imposition.

Our fellow presenters (Pack for a Purpose and Airline Ambassadors) have given positive presentations on how and where material assistance can be beneficial. The following information and examples will raise further understanding of the best ways to help and some of the traps to be aware of.

Books

Tonnes of inappropriate books appear to make their way to needy communities: unsuitable language, inappropriate culturally and often at a level that is not matched with the language levels of students. A village without electricity does not need a microwave cooking book, nor does an African village need to learn how to ski or gain positive learning from Mills and Boon!

Considerations:

- Is the shipping cost, customs fees and port taxes on arrival and further transport to the destination going to outweigh the value of the books?
- Do you have a person on the ground who can ensure they clear customs and reach their destination? Can they pay for the transport?
- In what state are the books? If they are outdated, damaged or irrelevant, they will just add to a waste problem.
- Is the information culturally relevant and useful?
- Is there a library and a staff member that cares for the books? If there is no system of storage and loans, then the books may all quickly disappear and not be seen again! Not so bad if being read. A total waste if being used to light the fire!
- If you are collecting books to send, make sure you create clear and specific guidelines as to what kind of books should be donated.
- See if other organizations are sending books to the same area and collaborate with them if possible.

An alternative positive way with literacy is to support the local production of suitable text books.

Priscilla Macy: "I did work for an African children's publishing company in Kenya which was started due to people there seeing such inappropriate books shipped from overseas for the children. The downside... it costs a lot to publish books there, but in the long run, you empower local writers and artists and bring employment to several parties."

Clothing

Clothing should only be sent if requested and truly needed. Check with a suitable organization working in the destination community, as to the specifics of what they require. Appropriate clothing, can be helpful, for example warm sweaters, knitted hats and gloves in cold climates; or infant clothing and footwear in good condition.

Considerations

- The sending of second hand clothing can undermine local markets, local sewing and manufacturing industries or established second hand clothing industries.
- Can the items be purchased affordably locally?
- What type of clothing, gender, sizes and ages are most needed. Be aware of what is culturally acceptable and suitable dress; ie not sending skimpy women's clothing to a conservative country.
- Underwear - never send second hand underpants for both reasons of hygiene and dignity. Bras - only where requested. There have been specific appeals for disadvantaged women in the Pacific - Vanuatu, Fiji and Tonga.
- Emergency situations - it can be useful in context - but *only* ever when requested. In most emergency situations there is not the human resources to do the sorting of mixed size and sex clothing to send what is most appropriate to the people in need.

Case study

Jane Crouch: <i>"In 2006 I took long service leave and volunteered at the Timor-Leste based NGO 'The Alola Foundation' which works particularly for the benefit of women and children. The country was in political crisis at</i>

the time and more than 100,000 people were living in displaced persons camps. Many had lost almost everything ...but in their simple UNHCR tents, they tried to at least maintain some simple security, routine and dignity. An Australian man turned up at Alola with a suitcase of second-hand women's underwear to give. We had to say 'sorry, we have a policy of not accepting second hand underwear'. New underwear is cheap to purchase locally, there are hygiene concerns and we believe that when people are in crisis - the least we can do is try and maintain their last shreds of dignity. The man was not prepared to accept 'No' for an answer and left saying that he would take it all to the Prime Minister's office who he believed would accept it unconditionally. Jokes aside at the images this conjured up, it was the attitude and lack of consultation with the beneficiaries that were of concern. We did wonder if his wife or daughters would be happy to wear secondhand knickers!"

School supplies

School supplies are something that are nearly always needed, but again support is best when just for specific requested items that can't easily be obtained locally. Bulk quantities of 'every day' stationery items to cater to the needs of whole classes are best acquired locally - supporting the local economy and meeting their specific requirements.

Considerations

- Lined notebooks, for example, lines may be different spacing to what the teachers are familiar with using to teach hand writing.
- Teaching aids - like atlas, dictionaries, posters etc may be helpful but try to obtain ones that are language/culturally specific.
- Robustness - avoid poor quality that quickly becomes broken or discarded.
- Packaging - avoid unnecessary packaging that becomes litter in the school yard or community.
- How will these be distributed? Are multiples of one item better than a mixed bag of assorted miscellaneous stuff - that could be fought over by kids wanting the 'different' items.
- Always give to staff in charge for use at their discretion, rather than handout to the kids. Avoid the scene where 'foreigners come and give us stuff because we're poor'.

Case study

Priscilla Macy: "We have an example in which a pre-school in Zambia has requested supplies so a pre-school teacher here has made stimulating, hardy, educational games with her class so the children in her class learn about Africa and doing for others and the children there receive items that they can also learn to make themselves."



Computers

- Do they have access to maintenance / repair services?
- Is electricity reliable? A voltage protector may be a useful adjunct.
- Does it have suitable software loaded on it?

- How old is it? If it is slow and 'tired' in the west, it will be just as frustrating for the new users and have a limited life. Poor communities should not be our dumping grounds for e-waste.

Case studies:

Bali orphanages article:

"These orphanages make most of their money from international NGOs and sympathetic visitors/tourists, who see the poor infrastructure and skinny, ragged children and want to do something to help. Often, these visitors make on-the-spot cash donations, bring clothing and books from their home countries or pledge money for repairs and school fees. Direct gifts of books, clothing or school supplies to the children are often taken away to be sold as soon as the donor leaves. In all but a few cases, the money goes directly into the director's pocket; several boast of sending their own children to university."

The Shipping Containers

The Peduli Anak Foundation (PAF) is a dynamic non-profit organization that fights for the rights of street children and underprivileged children in Indonesia by providing shelter, education, medical support, advocacy and family care programs. They were founded in the Netherlands with their main work being based on the island of Lombok. In 2010 thousands of items for children were gathered in the Netherlands and a shipping containers sent, intended for the PAF's rehabilitation centre and primary school for street children.

After the container arrived in Jakarta, there were major delays and bureaucracy while handling, customs, and import permits were sort. Hundreds of cups, plates and health equipment intended for the street children clinic were confiscated. The goods were stored while this was happening and the storage company charged 1300 euros. Later on handling and customs clearance fees were also approximately 1300 euros. These expenses had to be paid with donated funds. In the end PAF were grateful to receive the goods - but the time, inconvenience, stress and funds required significantly diverted PAF's resources.



Comfort Dolls

Priscilla Macy: "We have a program in which we have people here make "comfort dolls" and these are given to abused children when they arrive at a shelter in South Africa. These are hand-made and are carried over by travelers, not shipped (we tried that once as FedEx offered to cover the shipping but in the end, it still wasn't worth it as fees had to be paid on the other side). Those who make them become more aware of Southern Africa and feel a connection. We have now heard of a hospice in South Africa where the people there want to make dolls themselves so we are giving them the pattern that we created."

We conclude that, one of the questions that should be closely examined is: "How does one balance the good intentions and enthusiasm of the traveler/donor with what is best for the local communities?" We all need to look at this very closely. And... "What are we doing to understand what the 'best for the local communities' means?".

There are no perfect answers. But, we do all have a responsibility to be very honest with ourselves and the travelers and look very closely at the guidance we give travelers. The considerations and examples given here should be freely used to help support more effective giving. In many cases it is best advised that travelers give money instead of stuff. But if a community specifies specific material needs, that the funds are used wherever possible to purchase items locally near the beneficiary communities, and then, as is often said, the money has then 'given twice'!