



Volunteering Abroad: What Should I Think About Before I Go?

Before volunteering abroad, it's important to do your own research on volunteer organizations, to choose a good, reliable and reputable one that shares your values. Here are some questions that you should ask and matters you should consider before making a decision.

Structure of the organization

- How long has the organization been in existence?
- Do I share its beliefs or abide by its guiding principles?
- What countries does it work in? Does it specialize in a region or work in many locations?
- Does it employ people from the communities where it works?
- Is it open and transparent? Does it discuss both its successes and failures?

Fees

When you're looking to volunteer abroad through a specific organization, you must normally pay a fixed fee. This fee can cover a wide range of costs (e.g., airfare, living arrangements or project-related materials). It's important to understand where your money will be going and be comfortable with the cost breakdown. Keep in mind that organizations do have to pay their costs for operating in the country. Here are some questions you should ask regarding fees:

- How much does the activity cost?
- What is the cost breakdown? Am I comfortable with it?
- Does it include airfare and accommodation? Am I okay with the type of accommodation provided?
- Does the organization allow for any fundraising opportunities?
- Do the fees cover medical and travel insurance?
- Do I have to pay a deposit? If so, how much? Is it refundable?
- What is the cancellation policy?

Preparation and support

Before sending a group of volunteers abroad, many organizations offer pre-departure orientation sessions. These sessions provide information about the country you will be travelling to, health care, access to emergency aid, culture shock and other matters relevant to your stay. Here are some questions you should ask yourself or the organization regarding your preparation and the support you'll receive abroad:

- Can I connect with a past participant?
- Have I checked the [travel advisories](#) for my country of destination?
- Is there a pre-departure or in-country orientation on health and safety? If so, what will be covered during these sessions?
- Is there a local representative from the organization? Will there be airport pickup?
- Are there adequate measures in place if an emergency arises?
- Is there 24/7 support from the organization (in the country of destination)?
- Do I have a contact number and person should my flight be delayed?
- Do I know about dress codes, the organization's gift policy and other issues that may affect my experience?



Language and other skills

When you volunteer abroad, some projects require that you have a particular skill set, which may include language proficiency. It's very important find this out before you sign up for a project. As well, if you do have a particular skill set, you may be interested in looking for volunteer opportunities where you can apply it and gain experience. Here are some questions you should ask before picking a project:

- Is it a skilled-based project?
- Am I capable of executing all parts of the project?
- Do I need to speak the native language of the community where the project will take place?
- If not, will there be someone to help translate at all times? If there is a translator, do I feel this will provide me with the intercultural experience I'm looking for?

It can also be very helpful to look up reviews and blogs written by past participants to ensure that the organization has a good reputation.

Impact in the community

When you travel abroad to a community to work on a project, your work can have both a positive and negative impact. The Michaëlle Jean Centre for Global and Community Engagement highly values projects that are based on community-identified needs. Before you undertake a project, you must fully consider the potential impact of your work. Here are some questions that you should ask to evaluate the impact of your work:

- What would be the positive and negative impact on the host community?
- Can I think of any unforeseen environmental, cultural or gender-related consequences?
- Is the project based on a community need and will it have a sustainable long-term impact?
- Will I be doing work that could be done by members of the community?
- How does this project fit in with local community development?
- What added value are students expected to provide to this project?

Next steps

These questions are meant to serve as a tool to help you choose an international project. We strongly recommend that you seek out further information and advice before making your decision. The Centre can help you with advice and research suggestions. Please feel free to visit our office in Tabaret 304 or email us at servingothers@uOttawa.ca to talk about your international volunteering plans.

More information

Here are some websites where you can find more tips on choosing the right organization to volunteer with, as well as other useful information on travelling abroad:

[Click here to consult the website of CUSO International](#)

[Click here to consult My World Abroad](#)

[Click here to consult the website International Volunteer Programs Association — Selecting the Right Program](#)

[Click here to consult Verge Magazine — Volunteer Abroad: How to Choose a Volunteer Programme](#)

[Click here to consult Faculty of Social Sciences: International internships](#)

[Click here to consult Telfer School of Management: International exchange program](#)