

# **NGO's in Developing Countries**

*[www.thelongestwayhome.com](http://www.thelongestwayhome.com)*

While in Nepal I visited a Tibetan monastery over Losar, the new year. I knew a person volunteering there. Or rather they had paid an inordinate amount of money to stay there and work as an English teacher.

I've always had this 'thing' about people paying to volunteer. A dictionary describes a volunteer as "Without payment." I would presume this goes both ways? More often than not it's a paid vacation for fresh out of college students or business types without the time to do it themselves. In this context, lets invent a new word. Or perhaps the term volunteering needs to be broken down into categories. Either way, this pay-to-volunteer parted with over 4, 000 GBP = \$7,000 approx to an NGO for a 6 week stint at teaching English.

For \$7,000 they had their return flight, meals, visa and accommodation at the monastery paid for. A flight from their country costs \$1200 return. They were fed Daal Bhat en masse, which for one at a restaurant cost around \$1.50, accommodation at a guest house cost \$5 and an eight week visa \$60. That leaves quite a sizeable chunk of left over cash floating around. Administrative costs et al?

This person was to teach English, yet were neither a teacher, TEFL qualified, nor native English speaker. Just out of college themselves. There was no set curriculum, books, nor lesson plans in place. All traces of the previous pay-to-volunteer were gone. The NGO said it was a fresh start for them. Hmm, from another 5 people I spoke to from different NGO's offering the same thing, it all seemed like a common trend.

Meanwhile there were another two volunteers at the monastery. Both independent. Meaning they just showed up one day and asked if they could volunteer for food and accommodation. One ended up babysitting the head Lama's daughter most days, while spending the rest of the time trying to fix the wireless internet at the monastery. Yes they had wireless internet, but only for the head lama's personal computer. When he wasn't staying at this seriously plush house down the road that is.

The last volunteer came up from Indian 'eco sanctuary' to work for a month. They were disgusted at the money the head lama had, the volunteers who handed out free books and the NGO's who were profiting. They took it upon themselves to make a change. They went off and bought a giant plastic tub, and one morning tried to set up a weekly routine of bathing the young lamas. Used to only bathing once a month, or in their own good time. The little lama's were non too happy at being plunged into a tub of freezing cold Nepalese tap water on the first day. More wet than they, the volunteer was furious at their inability to be 'cleansed,' and thus left.

So which is worse of these NGO's, and volunteers? Well in my experience in this situation they are all pretty much equal. The young volunteers at least have the excuse of not having experience. They have a degree that says they are educated, but that does not necessarily mean much here. The head lama is as corrupt as the NGO's. I won't get into the corruption from this side of things here. But, it's there. If people want to change, the people must do it.

That leaves the NGO's. They are after all coming with that title. Granted it's so easy to set up an NGO I could head off tomorrow and create one for 'Independent travellers without a home.' Heck, I could probably even get a grant! NGO's need to be regulated. Not just on a per country basis, but on an international scale. Rated, ranked, audited with annual reports. Maybe that will add onto the price tag for pay-to-volunteer types, but hey?! What's a few more thousand to pay to work?

Let me set another example in motion here. TESOL and IELTS are two well recognised and international respected non profit organisations. They provide an examination for those from a non-English speaking country that gives them a certificate saying they are literate in the English language. This is great for anyone from a non-English speaking country wanting to study overseas in an English speaking country, or indeed to study.

So what's the price tag for the on-line exam? A whopping \$170 on average. That's just for the exam. Now, if you were an average worker in a developing country with a daily income of \$5 that is so far out of you reach it's not worth thinking about. I contact some of these organisations and asked why it was so expensive?

The replies I got were fairly corporate. "We are cheaper than the other organ ..."

Hmm, okay so how can an average person from a developing country afford the exam, let alone the course?

"We get a lot of developing country clientèle, and never had an issue."

With some local help I set about to find out if this was true, at least in one or two countries. It is. University's get government grants to help certain course work students apply for the exam. Civil workers also get language grants. Strange that latter one considering they are meant to be working in their own country, I guess that's only for foreign ministries? Maybe not.

So I got back in touch with the language non-profits and disclosed my findings and asked if they had any local independent people applying and if they offered any discounts or grants for those not currently in a local university nor government office.

Strangely it took a long time for them to reply. I tried again. Nope. The third attempt and a threat of a telephone call to a higher up gave me this reply "I replied last week, but our server gave a problem. Don't have the mail any more. Hope you got it"

Not much to say to that is there? Well ...

Still, they are at least give you the option of not signing up for them. Granted you might not have a choice if you want to study or work overseas, but then you could always buy a fake certificate and hope for the best. It's cheaper after all.

But then I think it is better than the NGO's who come crashing into a local community for 6 months to a year advocating their methodology on life. Before then packing up and leaving behind a community devastated by non-related geo-political viewpoints, socio economic separation and utter cultural whitewashing.

To conclude. I have worked as a volunteer (nonpay) and as a paid worker for a volunteer organisation. So I have seen both sides of the coin so to speak. And understand where both are coming from. I still say the NGO's need to be regulated, and these non-profits regulated a little more.

There are plenty of good volunteers, and non-profits out there. I will cover some later. It's just a shame the majority of bad one's get most of the publicity. So when you do an on-line search in the field of volunteering for an NGO, I would suggest you ask questions about them. Ask people from

the country involved, and not just the NGO itself!

I also hope to have something about this pay to volunteer thing in the future. But for now, that's my opening experience with NGO's in developing worlds I have travelled and worked in.