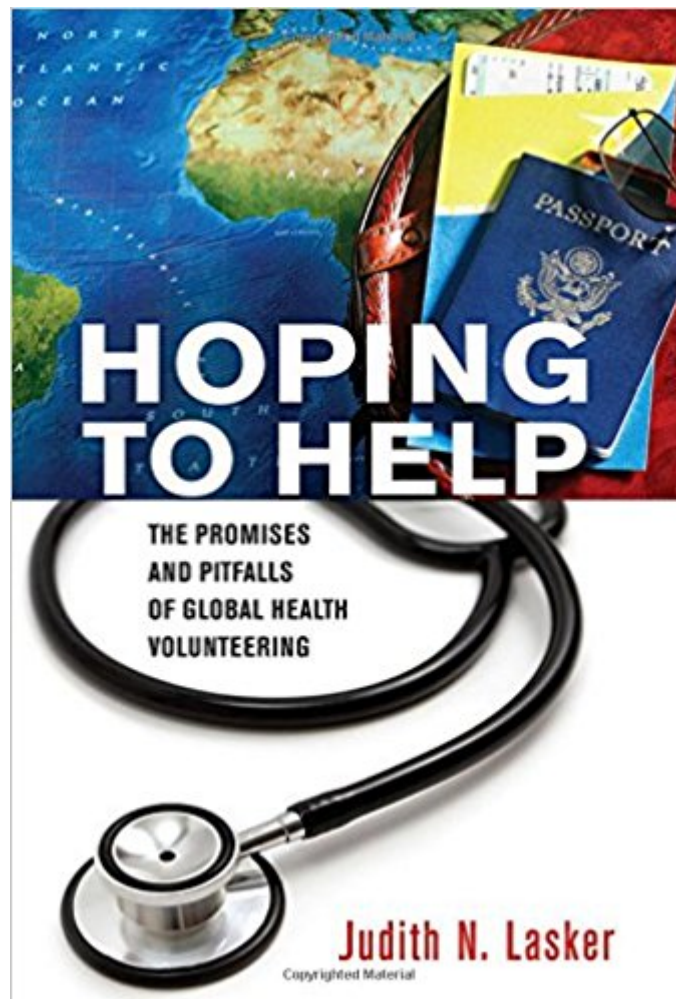


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Hoping To Help: The Promises And Pitfalls Of Global Health Volunteering (The Culture And Politics Of Health Care Work)



Synopsis

Overseas volunteering has exploded in numbers and interest in the last couple of decades. Every year, hundreds of thousands of people travel from wealthier to poorer countries to participate in short-term volunteer programs focused on health services. Churches, universities, nonprofit service organizations, profit-making "voluntourism" companies, hospitals, and large corporations all sponsor brief missions. *Hoping to Help* is the first book to offer a comprehensive assessment of global health volunteering, based on research into how it currently operates, its benefits and drawbacks, and how it might be organized to contribute most effectively. Given the enormous human and economic investment in these activities, it is essential to know more about them and to understand the advantages and disadvantages for host communities. Most people assume that poor communities benefit from the goodwill and skills of the volunteers. Volunteer trips are widely advertised as a means to "give back" and "make a difference." In contrast, some claim that health volunteering is a new form of colonialism, designed to benefit the volunteers more than the host communities. Others focus on unethical practices and potential harm to the presumed "beneficiaries." Judith N. Lasker evaluates these opposing positions and relies on extensive research—interviews with host country staff members, sponsor organization leaders, and volunteers, a national survey of sponsors, and participant observation—to identify best and worst practices. She adds to the debate a focus on the benefits to the sponsoring organizations, benefits that can contribute to practices that are inconsistent with what host country staff identify as most likely to be useful for them and even with what may enhance the experience for volunteers. *Hoping to Help* illuminates the activities and goals of sponsoring organizations and compares dominant practices to the preferences of host country staff and to nine principles for most effective volunteer trips.

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Customer Reviews

Following the huge earthquake in Haiti I was interested in volunteering to go there as an aid worker for up to a month. I'm not a nurse but was willing to do anything required. However I learnt that I would have to provide some thousands of euro to the NGO taking volunteers. This was explained by saying that it would cover flights, accommodation, food and travel insurance. But I didn't have money to give, especially if I would not be earning for that period. I'm self-employed. To me it seemed that I could give my money or my time but not both. Then a cholera outbreak (brought by Nepalese troops it turned out) meant that no aid workers were allowed to go, so I contributed a story to a charity anthology instead. Aid volunteering, especially in the area of healthcare which is the subject of this book, is a growth industry. Judith Lasker tells us that over a million people went abroad from America during 2007. Having read 'Disaster Capitalism' by Anthony Loewenstein I read her book following the money as much as anything. Sure enough, Judith who researched Haiti, Ghana, Ecuador and Niger, found that first-world governments have been soured towards handing aid to possibly corrupt nations and dictators, preferring to sponsor NGOs (non government organisations) or hand contracts to private companies. But if the countries dealt with the corruption they would be able to afford a health service, so essentially the outside aid was prolonging the corruption. Some long-established NGOs are seen as slow-moving and cumbrous, so individuals or small groups self-organise. While she managed to get a charity staffer to tell her that volunteer youth workers were not expected to do a good job - the purpose of their trip was to pay the charity and to be tapped for money again and again.

The Red Cross has repeatedly been criticized for sloppy blood-work and questionable fund-raising. I've also always been a bit suspicious of them sending volunteers around the country/world to help out, adding to the disaster-area housing and food demands, while contributing limited value (after transportation costs) and questionable talents that probably could be easily acquired/trained within the area. 'Hoping to Help' provided an objective opportunity to examine that thesis. Turns out that just international volunteer activities originating in the U.S. totaled about 162 million hours in

2007.(about 1 million American volunteers), with about 200 thousand of those in the healthcare area. About half the money spent on international volunteering goes to airlines and much of the rest pays for the cost of administration and supplies provided in the U.S. The vast majority of volunteer trips last two weeks or less; almost none of the groups have counterparts in the disaster area with whom to coordinate, or evaluate the impact of their presence. Somalian blogger Ossob Mohamud wrote 'Voluntourism almost always involves a group of idealistic and privileged travelers who have vastly different socio-economic statuses vs. those they serve. . . . The developing world has become a playground for the redemption of privileged souls looking to atone for global injustices by escaping the vacuity of modernity and globalization.' Looks like not all those in recipient areas are impressed either. Privatization of health services, partly required by the World Bank and IMF in response to mounting foreign debt) have brought a sharp decline in public services.

In the wake of what has become a phenomenon of global proportions, health care volunteering, also known as "voluntourism"™, poses cogent ethical questions that have been masterfully articulated and answered by Dr. Lasker in her book. A while ago, I had the pleasure to participate in one of the Lehigh Professor's™ presentations of her work and I was inspired to know more about the topic. Her book is certainly a "must-read"™ for both seasoned volunteers and all those who are fantasizing about giving their contribution to the world through global aid networks. The book develops around two main questions aiming to capture the positive and negative aspects of short-term volunteering, as Dr. Lasker asks: "what are the benefits, and the costs for host communities? Can these efforts be designed in such a way to maximize the benefits?" (p. 3) In answering such critical questions, the author examines data extrapolated from more than 100 interviews with people from host countries in Caribbean, Asia and Latin America, US-based sponsoring organization and volunteers she met during her fieldwork. In her analysis of the material, Dr. Lasker not only identifies the actual "pitfalls" and "promises" of global health volunteering, but she also, and most notably, ends the book with valuable recommendations for "wise practices"™. In her endeavor to analyze the complexities of a multifaceted phenomenon that cannot be simplified according to positive/negative parameters, she investigates the socio-historical and cultural background of various actors. In particular, she looks at religious organizations, corporate sponsors, educational institutions and NGOs, shedding light on their strategies of recruitment, their approaches, ideals and goals.

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