AAU GRS

9th semester report

The Ethical Infrastructure of Volunteer Travel: Lessons from the AFS

Federation Model

Abstract

This report examines the ethical challenges of volunteer tourism through a case study of AFS Interkultur Denmark. Based on a critical literature review and internship observations, it analyzes how AFS's federated structure, educational approach, and program marketing intersect with widespread critiques of voluntourism. The analysis identifies key gaps in transnational governance, volunteer-specific intercultural training, and ethical communication that risk perpetuating harm and simplistic "savior" narratives. It argues that AFS must strengthen its ethical infrastructure through consistent vetting, critical volunteer preparation, and honest messaging. By doing so, AFS can leverage its educational mission to model a more responsible, learning-centered approach to volunteer travel, transforming a potentially extractive practice into one grounded in mutual exchange and accountability.

Table of contents

Introduction

This thesis was written to reflect on my internship at AFS Interkultur Denmark, where I worked in the 18+ department. The main part of what I was doing was managing the sending part and developing the program. The main part of the program is volunteer travels.

AFS Interkultur is a nonprofit organization that primarily focuses on youth exchange and aims to foster peace through intercultural learning (AFS Interkultur, n.d). In recent years, they have also expanded into the volunteer travel sector. This part of AFS in Denmark remains relatively small compared to its main business, which focuses on sending young people under 18 on youth exchanges. I largely managed the volunteer travel component of the organization independently within a few weeks of the internship.

That part of the organization received few resources or attention, and through my work with it I began to reflect on how much thought had been given to the quality and ethical concerns surrounding the sending of young people on volunteer travel abroad.

Voluntourism is the practice of volunteering abroad while traveling and has become increasingly popular since the 1990s (Wearing & McGehee 2013, p. 120). However, this field has faced significant criticism due to ethical concerns surrounding it. Many scholars argue that voluntourism creates uneven power dynamics. They suggest it often puts the volunteer's experience above the needs of the communities involved. In some situations, it can even do harm, despite good intentions (Guttentag, 2009, p. 538). A well-known example is orphanage volunteering, which has been linked to child exploitation and trafficking. Research shows that short-term volunteer stays in orphanages can disrupt children's emotional development. Moreover, the demand for volunteers can lead to the establishment of orphanages in areas where they are not needed (van Doore & Nhep, 2023, p. 2).

Although I did find that AFS has some systems and values in place to address some of these ethical issues, its approach didn't seem very structured. AFS has a policy of not working with orphanages, and every internal project hosted by an AFS has a vetting process by the host AFS organization. But it was unclear how those projects are actually selected and reviewed, and I

didn't come across any written system or policy that addresses the broader ethical issues in this field.

Reflecting on this, I believed there was a need to understand the volunteer travel field better and how AFS could best approach this. So the purpose of this thesis is to understand the ethical issues and challenges connected to volunteer travel, and to use those insights to reflect on how AFS might approach this part of their work. This made me come to the following problem statement:

What are the key ethical critiques and governance challenges of voluntourism identified in academic literature, and how can these insights be used to inform responsible practice in organizations such as AFS Interkultur?

By addressing this question, the thesis will contribute some insights to organizations such as AFS Interkultur, "selling" volunteer travel experiences with the purpose of moving beyond good intentions and towards demonstrable educational and ethical impact.

The thesis will be structured as follows: first, a literature review to explore how voluntourism is understood in academic research. Then a short chapter on methodology and theory. After that, an analysis of the ethical issues raised in the literature and their relation to current practices in AFS. The thesis will also reflect on how AFS's focus on cultural exchange and intercultural learning could be used to approach these issues differently. It ends with a discussion and recommendations, followed by the conclusion.

Literature review

The purpose of this literature review is to gain an overview of the current academic understanding of voluntourism. This will function as an important base for being able to analyze how AFS as an organization should approach working in this sector.

Volunteer tourism or "voluntourism" is typically defined as travel in which tourists volunteer in an organized way during a holiday, commonly framed as helping to alleviate poverty, support local communities, or restoring the environment in some way (Wearing, 2001, p. 1). So in practice, voluntourism becomes a mix between leisure travel and short-term, often paid-for volunteer placements that require little to no prior training or specialized skills (McLennan & Thomas-Maude, 2023, p. 156). This mix is what is central; it produces both the pedagogical promise of "learning through encounter" and the ethical risk of development problems becoming consumable experiences (Wearing & McGehee, 2013, p. 121–123).

Voluntourism as development or representation

A recurring debate in the academic field of voluntourism concerns whether it contributes meaningfully to development or whether its significance lies more in how it represents development in the global north. Butcher (2024) makes the argument, that even when material impacts are limited, volunteer tourism matters as a "public face of development" that affects how people imagine poverty, and moral action (Butcher, 2024, p. 152–153). In a similar vein, Simpson's analysis of the gap-year industry shows how "doing development" is often put in a simplified moral narrative that makes development appear "doable, knowable and accessible," legitimizing the presence of unskilled volunteers through a charity discourse (Simpson, 2004, p. 684,690). These narratives are not neutral: they frequently rely on "simple dualisms," where "need" and "poverty" become key marketing hooks and host communities risk being reduced to a simplified "Other" positioned as the object of Western benevolence (Simpson, 2004, p. 682, 686).

Motivations, learning, and the limits of "transformation"

Voluntourism is often presented, and understood by participants, as a personally transformative practice that blends altruism with self-development. Sin's fieldwork puts focus on how motivations can center on travel to "different" or "exotic" destinations, with "helping" being an inseparable part (Sin, 2009, p. 488–489). Sin also found that, while interviewees described some post-trip shifts in opinion, it was inconclusive whether these translated into substantial changes in their value systems, social consciousness, or willingness to continue volunteering afterward (Sin, 2009, p. 481).

A qualitative study from New Zealand suggests that one way volunteer tourism can support meaningful cultural encounters is by spending sustained time in the host community, and that this relationship is shaped through everyday interaction. In McIntosh and Zahra's study, participants described their experience as an "alternative" Māori cultural product, one they understood as grounded in "authentic cultural content" and contemporary Māori life rather than a staged cultural performance (McIntosh & Zahra, 2007, p. 546). Host perspectives also had an effect on the encounter, community members explained the purpose of protocols and made clear that some elements were part of their own cultural practice rather than something performed just for visitors, which helped set the mutual understanding of the exchange (McIntosh & Zahra, 2007, p. 549; p. 554–555).

Cultural learning does not simply happen because volunteers and hosts spend time together. Raymond and Hall argue that cross-cultural understanding should be treated as an explicit aim of volunteer tourism programmes, not something that automatically follows from placing people overseas (Raymond & Hall, 2008, p. 538). They also point out the role of sending organizations. Preparation, support in the field, and reflection after returning are crucial for whether programs challenge stereotypes or reinforce them (Raymond & Hall, 2008, p. 542). Similarly, McLennan and Thomas-Maude suggest we should rethink voluntourism as "cultural exchange." This means mutual giving and receiving that values relationships, respect, and different ways of knowing. However, they point out that this new perspective still needs to address issues of justice and inequality instead of ignoring them (McLennan & Thomas-Maude, 2023, p. 156).

Ethical critiques: harm, displacement, and the political economy of "helping"

Ethical critiques emphasize that good intentions do not necessarily prevent harm. Guttentag notes that volunteers may end up doing the work that could be done by local workers, which leads to a displacement of paid jobs, and, when this "free" labor becomes a regular arrangement, it creates a cycle of dependency (Guttentag, 2009, p. 544-545).

Also, a well-known issue in the area of volunteer travel is the language used in marketing the projects; as it often comes with the promise of "sense of achievements", it may gloss over the real inequalities and promoting simplified narratives about the communities involved. This helps shift the focus towards the emotional benefits for the volunteer and away from the actual structural problem, as observed by Mostafanezhad (2014, p. 91-92).

Critical political-economy critiques link the risks of voluntourism to wider neoliberal trends. Mostafanezhad describes volunteer tourism as a form of "popular humanitarianism," where concern for people far away turns into consumer-style actions and volunteer experiences. She points out that volunteer tourism is influenced by a neoliberal logic that reframes structural inequality as a matter of individual morality (Mostafanezhad, 2014, p. 4). She also argues that sentimentality in volunteer encounters can act as a distraction. It can shift focus from systemic inequality to personal emotions, including the "intimate" ways these encounters relate to larger views and policies (Mostafanezhad, 2014, p. 91–92). In her conclusion, she bluntly states that feeling solidarity is not enough. Without tackling the political and economic practices that uphold inequality, voluntourism risks maintaining the underlying conditions (Mostafanezhad, 2014, p. 146–147).

Butcher and Smith makes a similar argument with "life politics." They suggest that volunteer tourism reflects a time when grand political narratives have diminished. People seek agency through personal lifestyle choices. Because of that, "making a difference" can easily become a limited, local approach to development, appearing as charity instead of collective change (Butcher & Smith, 2010, p. 31, 33).

These critiques become especially pronounced in orphanage tourism. In their research in Cambodia, Guiney and Mostafanezhad show how visits and volunteering can support a market that keeps children separated from their families and in residential care. This setup attracts donations and tourist spending, which has led to a larger boom in residental care centres that aim to capture foreign support (Guiney & Mostafanezhad, 2014, p. 140-141). They also highlight how "care" becomes part of the backpacker experience as a form of responsible travel. This means the institution's practices may respond more to visitor preferences than to the needs of the children (Guiney & Mostafanezhad, 2014, p. 146). In addition, van Doore and Nhep point out the dangers linked to weak safeguarding. These include minimal screening, unusually open access to children, and the risks that come with a constant turnover of short-term caregivers, leading to disruption in attachment relationships (van Doore & Nhep, 2023, p. 9-10).

Governance, standards, and organizational responsibility

Because voluntourism is organized through intermediaries, the question of governance becomes important, especially in programs where participants are paying for the placements. Wearing and McGehee argue that as commercial operators grow, volunteer travel risks catering to the preferences of paying customers. They call for a need for improved ways to manage the sector and emphasize the need for good practices (Wearing & McGehee, 2013, p. 123-124). They also note the increasing interest in developing clearer criteria and credentials for good practice in volunteer tourism, indicating a move toward more defined standards and accountability (Wearing & McGehee, 2013, p. 127). One practical response to this is Hartman et al. ´s (2014) Fair Trade Learning framework. This framework establishes ethical standards for community-engaged international volunteer tourism. It focuses on host direction, transparency, reciprocity, and sustained commitment in designing programs, rather than viewing "helping" as an experience separate from these dimensions (Hartman et al., 2014, p. 111-113). Looking at it from this perspective, the ethical dimensions are assessed less by volunteers' intentions and more by the systems that influence power, decision-making, and responsibility over time.

The literature shows that voluntourism is a field filled with ongoing tensions. These tensions exist between learning and harm, solidarity and spectacle, and development and consumption. They cannot be solved with better branding or goodwill. What truly matters is how programs are built and managed. Projects should be developed with local people, designed to genuinely benefit host communities, and approached as a learning process. Interaction and exchange should be intentionally facilitated instead of being assumed to occur naturally (Raymond & Hall, 2008, p. 539, 541). Guttentag also argues that negative impacts are not unavoidable; they depend on planning and management. This includes matching volunteer roles with community needs and taking regulation and oversight seriously (Guttentag, 2009, p. 549).

McLennan and Thomas-Maude's shift towards "cultural exchange" supports this idea. It puts emphasis on mutuality, respect for different knowledge systems, and the importance of considering justice and equity, rather than assuming that exchange is always positive (McLennan & Thomas-Maude, 2023, p. 156).

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Theoretical Framework

Edward Said's (1979) concept of Orientalism provides a lens for this study: it points out how Western discourses have long portrayed "the East" as exotic, backward, and in need of Western guidance. This discursive power–knowledge dynamic places the West as superior (Said, 1979 p. 2-3) and underlies many volunteer programs. Voluntourism critics argue that similar "savior" narratives persist today. For example, Lundstrom (2017) points out that the idea that unskilled Westerners can do good just because they mean well suggests a belief in the superiority of Western culture. In reality, some NGOs present host communities as passive recipients, reflecting colonial stereotypes.

Scholars have pointed out how voluntourism is turning compassion into a product. Sin (2009) makes the argument that volunteer experiences are sold as profitable consumer goods. This creates a feel-good story that simplifies social issues into a consumable experience. Eefting (2016) notes that altruism and poverty are marketed as attractions, while local needs are overlooked. Hallard (2025) points out that many large agencies retain most of the volunteer fees, benefiting volunteers and companies more than the host communities. This "do well by doing good" business model (Popham, 2015) can trivialize deep inequality.

Power and othering are important themes. Volunteers and organizations often unintentionally support the North is better than the South hierarchy. Hallard (2025) points out that promotional materials sometimes label countries like Nepal as "one of the poorest in the world" that need foreign aid. This is undermining local agency.

Similarly, Mostafanezhad (2014) and Simpson (2004) show that volunteers often are of the view that the communities they are going to are vulnerable "others" who are in need of saving. This kind of language fosters a "us versus them" mentality and sustains a belief that the Global North must save the poor Global South. Overall, the literature on voluntourism indicates that the words and stories organizations use shape participants' ethical views. What seems generous may hide unequal power dynamics (Said, 1979; Sin, 2009; Hallard, 2025). This framework will guide the analysis of AFS Interkultur Denmark's practices.

Methodology

This study combines a detailed literature review with firsthand observation. Firstly, I examined key academic critiques of voluntourism and ethical engagement, including works by Sin (2009), Mostafanezhad (2014), Simpson (2004), and others to outline the discussion. Secondly, during my internship at AFS Interkultur Denmark, I collected field data through direct observation, casual conversations, and internal documents.

Given my dual role as AFS staff and researcher, reflexivity is important. I regularly reflected on how my background and values could influence the research. Willig (2013, p. 10) defines positional reflexivity as considering how one's own experiences and commitments shape the research process. I consciously examined moments when my alignment with AFS's goals might bias my view and sought feedback from peers to check these biases. According to Crossley et al. (2016), a researcher's positionality is rather fluid, not simply insider or outsider. I thus viewed myself as an "in-betweener," acknowledging that my deep knowledge of AFS (insider) could help understanding, while also striving to keep a critical distance (outsider) in analysis.

By comparing the literature with my personal observations and reflective notes, this approach aims to clarify how AFS Interkultur functions within the larger voluntourism discussion. It balances respect for the organization's goals with a thoughtful academic perspective.

This thesis follows a problem-based learning approach. It starts from a practice-linked problem and uses theory to explore it, rather than beginning with a fixed model to test. The problem statement grew out of my internship at AFS Interkultur Denmark, where I saw both the educational ambitions of volunteer travel and the ethical issues that can arise in intermediary, fee-based programmes, especially with limited resources. PBL kept the project focused: the literature review is used to clarify key tensions and governance challenges in voluntourism and what they might imply for AFS. At the same time, it sets the scope. With one organisational case and limited internship material, the aim is not to evaluate AFS's impacts, but to connect academic critiques to concrete organisational priorities.

Analysis

Governance and accountability in federated voluntourism

AFS Interkultur Denmark operates within a globally federated model, where independent national organizations (like AFS Interkultur Denmark) retain significant autonomy. This structure is central to the accountability challenge: while AFS has a clear global position against orphanage partnerships, identifying, vetting, and monitoring placements is mostly left to the AFS office in the host country.

Without a common standard for due diligence across the federation, the ethical quality of placements can differ from one country to another, even when the sending branch, like Denmark, is acting with good intentions.

This is not a unique problem within AFS. Research on voluntourism consistently shows how intermediary models create governance as an important ethical issue. Wearing and McGehee argue that as fee-paying markets grow, volunteer travel can shift toward meeting the expectations of paying participants instead of focusing on the needs of host communities. They directly call for "better ways to manage" the sector (Wearing & McGehee, 2013, p. 123). Their main argument is not just to "regulate more," but to highlight that the structure of organizations significantly influences whether volunteer tourism causes harm or supports goals led by host communities.

AFS's orphanage ban is a clear example of governance driven by safety concerns. The orphanage tourism research shows how the demand for volunteers can support harmful care systems. This includes encouraging the continued placement of children in institutions, as their presence brings in donations and spending from visitors (Guiney & Mostafanezhad, 2014, pp. 140–141).

AFS's policy supports the idea that the benefits volunteers may gain are limited and often overshadowed by the risks to safety and other harms (van Doore & Nhep, 2023, p. 1). This reasoning also applies to situations beyond orphanages. Poor screening, unclear role boundaries, and easy access to vulnerable groups raise the risk of harm, especially when

short-term volunteers frequently enter sensitive environments (van Doore & Nhep, 2023, pp. 9, 10).

For a federation such as AFS, governance becomes an issue of practicality, for example what does "minimum standard" mean in different countries, and how can we see it? The Fair Trade Learning framework can help put here because it focuses on structure instead of just intentions. It emphasizes host direction, transparency, reciprocity, and long-term commitments as program requirements. This shift moves them from being just aspirational language (Hartman et al., 2014, pp. 111–113). In relation to AFS, this means a need for establishing articulated criteria for placement across the federation, including safeguarding. It also calls for expectations of documentation that make host-branch vetting clear and open to review, rather than simply assumed.

This suggests that for AFS, the primary ethical risk is not the individual volunteer's intent, but a systemic gap in transnational accountability and consistent, verifiable due diligence across its federation.

Volunteer-specific intercultural learning

AFS excels in its unique area of intercultural learning. However, the context of volunteer travel introduces challenges that standard exchange preparation often overlooks. Volunteers are not just cultural learners; they come as "helpers" within unequal global systems. This role can lead to ethical misunderstandings as easily as it promotes learning.

Raymond and Hall are clear about this. Cross-cultural understanding should be seen as a goal to be planned and supported; it is not simply an automatic result of being near others or having good intentions (Raymond & Hall, 2008, p. 538). They also hold sending organizations responsible because preparation, facilitation, and organized reflection after returning affect whether experiences challenge or reinforce stereotypes (Raymond & Hall, 2008, p. 542). In other words, just "being there" is not enough for effective learning.

This matches what Sin finds in volunteer tourism work. Participants can interpret experiences through existing frames, and it is possible for stereotypes to be strengthened instead of challenged, especially when poverty and difference are viewed without a guided reflection

(Sin, 2009, p. 497). Simpson makes a similar argument in the gap-year context. She advocates for teaching that goes beyond superficial cultural interactions and pushes toward social justice learning. This approach makes it possible to discuss structural inequality (Simpson, 2004, p. 690). Without this focus, participants may describe privilege as "luck" instead of recognizing it as a result of political and economic structures (Simpson, 2004, pp. 688–689).

When applying this to AFS, we can consider a specific critique. An intercultural course for exchange students is a good starting point, but it won't be comprehensive enough for volunteer placements unless it includes relevant content. This content should cover dimensions such as humility in their role as volunteers, setting boundaries, power dynamics, and a basic understanding of development critique. If the aim of AFS is an "active global citizenship," then the learning design must consider voluntourism as a politically and ethically important way to engage, not just a cultural one.

As a consequence, without a tailored system of preparation for the volunteers, AFS's existing educational strength could inadvertently legitimize a harmful volunteer practice, turning its hallmark intercultural pedagogy into an ethical liability.

Ethical communication and "making a difference" narratives

The way that AFS markets their programs will influence how volunteers view their roles at their volunteer placements. The narrative of "make a difference" resonates well with many, exactly because it aligns with common motivations. However, studies have shown that this also carries the risk of leading to unrealistic expectations about impact and promoting a savior mindset for the young volunteers.

Simpson illustrates how gap-year marketing often relies on simple promises to create positive change or make a difference, while leaving the broader context unclear (Simpson, 2004, p. 683). This "savior" narrative can be viewed as a contemporary manifestation of Said's Orientalist discourse, constructing the host community as the passive, needy 'Other' awaiting rescue by the volunteer's active, benevolent Western subject.

In this framework, development becomes a tale of personal virtue and immediate action rather than a space for political debate. Mostafanezhad sharpens this critique by describing volunteer tourism as "popular humanitarianism," where moral concerns transform into individual, consumer-like actions (Mostafanezhad, 2014, pp. 3–4). She also indicates how feelings and personal connections can turn inequality into a question of individual morality, making injustice emotionally understandable while largely leaving its causes unchanged (Mostafanezhad, 2014, pp. 91–92). Butcher and Smith help clarify why these narratives continue: volunteer tourism aligns with a "life politics" era, where people seek agency through personal choices as sweeping political stories fade (Butcher & Smith, 2010, p. 31).

The issue is this: "making a difference" can narrow down to a limited view of development as small charity work and "basic needs." This overlooks the idea of collective change (Butcher & Smith, 2010, p. 33). AFS doesn't have to stop using inspirational language, but they should use it very carefully. A reasonable approach, that would be in line with AFS's identity, would be presenting volunteer programs mainly as organized learning and support under the guidance of hosts. It should also clarify what a short-term volunteer can and cannot responsibly claim.

The challenge, therefore, lies in reframing the narrative of "making a difference" towards a commitment to internal, transformative learning, which is what aligns with AFS's educational mission, instead of promoting unrealistic savior fantasies.

Discussion and Reflection

What this analysis suggests

The analysis above, using AFS Interkultur Denmark as a case in point, points to three connected dimensions of voluntourism ethics and practice.

First, governance and accountability are essential for carrying out this work responsibly. A federated NGO must uphold consistent ethical standards in various situations. This means balancing global policies, such as AFS's orphanage ban, with local actions. If coordination or oversight is lacking, vetting can become inconsistent, which increases the risk of harm.

Shared frameworks, like the Fair Trade Learning principles focused on reciprocity and transparency, can provide a way to improve accountability among partners and projects.

Second, intercultural learning relies on more than just good intentions. Volunteers need structured preparation and reflection to turn "intercultural experience" into meaningful learning and to lessen the chance of causing unintended harm. AFS's general intercultural training offers a solid foundation, but it could benefit from a clearer focus on the important questions surrounding voluntourism, such as power dynamics, different ideas of development, and how "help" can lead to inequality.

Third, ethical communication is important because it shapes volunteers' expectations and the moral framework they carry with them. Honest messaging that acknowledges complexity and centers mutual learning can help reduce the tendency to portray volunteers as saviors.

Across these themes, there is a constant tension between ideals and realities. There is the desire to help versus the chance of causing harm. There is the promise of cultural exchange versus the risk of misunderstanding. Lastly, there is the need to inspire participation versus the duty to be honest. These tensions does not disappear, but the literature suggests they can be handled through deliberate strategies, routine reflection, and willingness to revise practice over time. In this sense, AFS functions less as an example of "voluntourism gone wrong" (as some for-profit operators are portrayed in critical research) and more as a useful case for thinking through how even long-standing, values-driven organizations need to adapt as critiques of volunteer tourism evolve.

The limits of this analysis should be stated clearly. It relies on internship observations and academic sources, but it does not have access to many of AFS's internal data on host community outcomes or its decision-making processes. Although, the fact that this data did not seem to be available is also a point. As a result, this critique focuses on external structures and policies rather than evaluating the real-world impact, which only local stakeholders can truly assess. However, the connection between observed practices and recurring issues in the literature offers a solid foundation for pinpointing where improvements are likely to have the most effect.

Practical trade-offs

Raising ethical standards and deepening the educational side of voluntourism involves real trade-offs.

For AFS, a federation built on trust and safety, the balance between vetting and scale is fundamental. Focusing on fewer, high-integrity partnerships directly supports its mission of fostering peace through responsible engagement. On the other hand, pursuing growth at the expense of ethical standards risks undermining the organization's credibility and may even trigger the very harm its mission aims to overcome. The choice is between being a niche, ethical leader or a mainstream, commodified provider.

Training involves an important trade-off that goes to the core of AFS's identity. As an educational organization, investing in strong pre-departure training fulfills its mission to create 'active global citizens.' While more intensive preparation might discourage some applicants looking for an easy 'volunteer holiday,' it will draw in those who connect with AFS's deeper educational goals. On the other hand, neglecting this investment turns AFS's main offering, intercultural learning, into a commodity. It risks handing off ethical education to the often-problematic field of voluntourism, possibly reducing its unique strength to a facade.

Communication also involves a balancing act. Highly idealistic messages, like "change the world," may attract more applicants. However, more realistic communication can lead to volunteers with clearer expectations and a stronger commitment to careful practice.

AFS therefore has to consider whether recruiting a smaller group of better-prepared volunteers is preferable to recruiting larger numbers who may expect a more superficial experience.

With practical adjustments, it is possible to manage these trade-offs. Online modules can lower the costs while still improving preparation on a larger scale. Marketing can emphasize AFS's commitment to intercultural learning as a central focus of volunteer travel, rather than relying on simplified "impact" claims. It is also important to recognize that sticking to the current situation has its own trade-offs. Ignoring ethical issues carries the risk of leading to reputational damage, dissatisfaction from the volunteers when reality does not match up to

their expectations, and, most importantly, harm to communities. When deciding how to proceed, AFS as an organization, both locally and the larger federation as a whole, should involve stakeholders in reflection, including volunteers, staff, host partners, and, when possible, host community representatives. Given AFS's mission, decisions should lean toward education and ethics, because AFS's credibility as an intercultural exchange organization rests on practicing responsibility and global citizenship, not only promoting them.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis and the wider voluntourism literature, the recommendations below are offered as practice-facing implications. Using AFS Interkultur as a lens, they outline a small set of concrete priorities that follow from the tensions discussed in the chapter.

1. Establish a Global Ethical Vetting Framework:

To address the inherent governance weaknesses in AFS's federated structure, AFS International should help develop a binding global ethical framework. This would involve developing a set of vetting criteria and safeguarding policies for volunteer projects that would apply across the federation. It could include standard guidelines on child protection, community consultation, and making sure volunteer roles do not replace local jobs. AFS International could gather a working group with representatives from different countries to establish these standards, which each national AFS would then put into practice. This approach shares accountability and increases transparency, closing the current gap where vetting practices vary by country.

2. Enhance Pre-Departure and On-Site Training:

Put resources toward devloping a training module specifically for volunteers that adds to the existing intercultural learning course. The content for this should focus on dimensions such as power dynamics, ethical volunteering, and critical reflection. For instance, use case studies of some of the common pitfalls in. Facilitate discussions on how to handle these kind situations or dilemmas. Including host perspectives through for example

testimonials with alumni or staff from host countries can help ground this training in real-world contexts. Make sure trained facilitators, they could possibly be returned volunteers with relevant insights, lead reflective sessions during the volunteer program, not just before and after. In this way, learning will be continuous and connected to the experience.

3. Implement Structured Reflection and Debriefing:

Make post-return debriefs and ongoing reflection a required part of the volunteer programs. AFS could, for example, hold a post-departure seminar where volunteers share experiences and confront any misconceptions or ethical dilemmas they encountered. This debrief could consolidate lessons learned and potentially channel volunteers heightened intercultural awareness into future action (aligning with AFS's aim to foster active global citizens). It's a low-cost measure that significantly increases the transformative potential of the experience, and it something already practiced at some level in the organization.

4. Align Marketing with Reality and Values:

Revise promotional materials and social media outreach to reflect AFS's ethical position. This means focusing on intercultural exchange and learning outcomes instead of "helping" outcomes. Concrete steps could include sharing stories in which host community members express what they gained from hosting a volunteer. This approach avoids making the volunteer the only focus or protagonist and gives agency and voice to the host community. Imagery or language that treats communities as helpless or similar should not be used. Instead, show volunteers and locals as partners. Internally, provide training for marketing and admissions staff so they understand how to frame messages in a way that aligns with AFS's educational mission and the complexities of voluntourism. Over time, this honest messaging could attract volunteers committed to the same goal as AFS and filter out those looking for a simplistic charity narrative.

5. Foster Ongoing Ethical Dialogue within AFS:

Finally, encourage a culture of continuous learning about voluntourism ethics within the organization. AFS could host webinars or learning circles for staff and volunteers to

discuss new research (for example, disseminating summaries of key studies like those by Mostafanezhad or Guttentag). By keeping the global network informed of debates, such as the risks of orphanage tourism or the unintended consequences of certain narratives, AFS can adapt proactively. Additionally, establishing feedback channels for host communities (even indirectly through host AFS partners) would ground AFS's ethical practice in the lived reality of those communities, ensuring their voices inform program improvements.

Conclusion

This analysis moves from the well-known ethical critiques of voluntourism to specific structural issues within a long-standing educational NGO. For AFS Interkultur, the main challenge is not the absence of good intentions but the need to connect its federated operations, educational knowledge, and public messaging with the important insights from current voluntourism research. The findings highlight three related areas where this connection is essential: setting up accountable governance across the federation, creating volunteer-focused intercultural learning that deals with power and inequality, and sharing ethical, realistic stories with potential volunteers.

Looking at the uncertain nature of AFS's volunteer travel programs, the organization is faced with a significant strategic decision. It can go down the road of slow growth and low-risk basic safeguarding for its small, volunteer travel activities. Alternatively, AFS can draw on its years of experience in intercultural education to create a new approach.

This would require investing in a more uniform and detailed screening process, effective teaching methods, and open communication to transform the questionable aspects of volunteer tourism into a genuine, knowledge-driven exchange. Implementing this new approach will likely mean sacrificing some short-term growth and popularity, but it will serve as a protection of the organization's brand and main goal of fostering peace through intercultural learning.

AFS's unique position presents both a challenge and an opportunity. Its strong commitment to "active global citizenship" provides the ethical and teaching framework needed to rethink volunteer travel. By following the recommendations here, improving federal oversight, improving preparatory and reflective learning, and making marketing match educational values, AFS has the opportunity to do more than just mitigate risk of harm or unethical practices. It can develop a model of ethical voluntourism that emphasizes structured learning, input from the host community, and responsible partnerships. Through these efforts, AFS would improve its practices and set a strong example for the wider sector. It

would show that the benefits of intercultural exchange, approached with careful reflection and accountability, can be the future direction of the sector.

Reference List

AFS Interkultur. (n.d). *Om AFS*. Retrieved December 10, 2025, from https://afs.dk/om-afs/

Butcher, J. (2024). Volunteer tourism in the context of development thinking. *Tourist Studies, 24*(2), 152–171. doi: 10.1177/14687976241233851

Butcher, J., & Smith, P. (2010). 'Making a difference': Volunteer tourism and development. *Tourism Recreation Research, 35*(1), 27–36. DOI 10.1080/02508281.2010.11081616

Crossley, M., Arthur, L., & McNess, E. (Eds.). (2016). *Revisiting insider–outsider research in comparative and international education*. Symposium Books.

Eefting, K. (2016). *Volunteer tourism and neocolonialism: The role of the volunteer* (Master's thesis, Utrecht University).

Guiney, T., & Mostafanezhad, M. (2014). The political economy of orphanage tourism in Cambodia. *Tourist Studies, 15*(2), 132–155. doi:10.1177/1468797614529449

Guttentag, D. A. (2009). The possible negative impacts of volunteer tourism. *International Journal of Tourism Research, 11*(6), 537–551. doi:10.1002/jtr.727

Hallard, A. (2025, May 29). *Doing good or doing harm? A critical examination of voluntourism*. Human Rights Research Center (HRRC).

Hartman, E., Paris, C. M., & Blache-Cohen, B. (2014). Fair trade learning: Ethical standards for community-engaged international volunteer tourism. *Tourism and Hospitality Research, 14*(1–2), 108–116. DOI 10.1177/1467358414529443

Lundström, K. (2017, April 3). *Orientalism and the neo-imperialism of "voluntourism"*. Not Even Past, University of Texas at Austin.

McIntosh, A. J., & Zahra, A. (2007). A cultural encounter through volunteer tourism: Towards the ideals of sustainable tourism? *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 15*(5), 541–556. doi:10.2167/jost701.0

McLennan, S. J., & Thomas-Maude, J. (2023). Voluntourism and cultural exchange in Peru and Fiji: Othering or authenticity? *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management, 56*, 155–162. doi:10.1016/j.jhtm.2023.07.002

Mostafanezhad, M. (2014). *Volunteer tourism: Popular humanitarianism in neoliberal times*. Routledge.

Popham, G. (2015, June 29). Boom in "voluntourism" sparks concerns over whether the industry is doing good. *Reuters*.

Raymond, E. M., & Hall, C. M. (2008). The development of cross-cultural (mis)understanding through volunteer tourism. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 16*(5), 530–543. doi:10.1080/09669580802159610

Said, E. W. (1979). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.

Simpson, K. (2004). 'Doing development': The gap year, volunteer-tourists and a popular practice of development. *Journal of International Development, 16*(5), 681–692. doi:10.1002/jid.1120

Sin, H. L. (2009). Volunteer tourism, "Involve me and I will learn"? *Annals of Tourism Research, 36*(3), 480–501. doi:10.1016/j.annals.2009.03.001

van Doore, K. E., & Nhep, R. (2023). Orphanage tourism and orphanage volunteering: Implications for children. *Frontiers in Sustainable Tourism, 2*, Article 1177091. doi:10.3389/frsut.2023.1177091

Wearing, S. (2001). *Volunteer tourism: Experiences that make a difference*. CABI Publishing.

Wearing, S., & McGehee, N. G. (2013). Volunteer tourism: A review. *Tourism Management, 38*, 120–130. doi:10.1016/j.tourman.2013.02.002

Willig, C. (2013). *Introducing qualitative research in psychology* (3rd ed.). McGraw-Hill Education/Open University Press.