



Answering the Tough Questions

This is a compilation of common criticisms or questions of international non-profit development organizations, including Global Brigades. You can use this as a guide to help field questions that can sometimes be difficult to answer, but are well worth the critical thinking! If you have questions that are not answered here, please feel free to reach out to your Chapter Advisor.

What can students accomplish in just one week?

One student working with a community for just one week doesn't make a lot of impact. What makes Global Brigades projects successful is the fact that each volunteer is part of a bigger picture. We have many volunteers throughout the year working on projects with communities. We also have full-time local staff working throughout the year in each of our countries. With community members, volunteers, and full-time staff working together, each week adds up to have meaningful impact.

Why aren't you working here (United States, Canada, UK, Europe)? What about local poverty?

Volunteers do not have to choose to volunteer either locally *or* internationally; it does not have to be mutually exclusive. Volunteers with Global Brigades can most definitely volunteer with local organizations as well. Global Brigades cannot be all things to everyone, either. In order to be an effective organization, we need to focus on our strengths; even in the communities we work with, we cannot be a part of everything. Our primary volunteer base is made up of students, so we need to focus on projects not only that community members want to be a part of, but that students can successfully and effectively be a part of as well.

Student volunteers gain experience in leadership, development, and go through personal and professional growth, which is translatable to community development in their home countries as well. Hopefully, experience with international development will inspire volunteers to become more engaged with their communities at home as well.

How are you different from a voluntourism organization?

Our focus is on communities and sustainability. Yes, students and other volunteers get to experience another country, but the focus is not on sightseeing tours. We have nearly 100 local technicians and staff working to perpetuate projects year-round when we don't have brigades in-country. Although the brigades travelling to these countries are vital to projects' success, equally so are all the staff and community members.

Why students?

Students are most often the most motivated kind of person to travel to another country and be humble and ready to learn from the experience. Students are one



of our two major stakeholders (the other being community members). It is our organization's mission to empower both students and communities and create a learning exchange for both. This mutual learning is what allows for real collaboration and steers us away from the vertical model of development that happens when volunteers don't want to learn from the people they are working with.

What if students stop coming? Are student volunteers sustainable?

If students become uninterested in the projects and no longer participate on brigades, we are at risk of no longer being able to work with communities. This is why we work with students to develop their leadership skills and stress the importance of sustainability on each campus, by holding an annual Student Leadership Conference, supporting Exchanges, and developing plans for leadership succession on each campus with the help of a Chapter Advisor.

Some students might be entering into a brigade with a saviour mentality. How can you justify this?

This is true, and this is something we strive to teach students about. We do not believe we are "saving" anybody and we do not want our volunteers to think that this is what they are doing when they go on a brigade. We want to be a part of teaching and empowering students to change their point of view if they feel this way; part of our Mission is to change hearts and minds of participants to "collaboratively work towards an equal world." We also believe that communities will empower students to learn about working collaboratively and that a saviour complex is disrespectful. Students should have the opportunity to learn about this. We also include discussions about this in our Pre-Brigade Curricula.

Isn't this another form of colonialism?

It is important to critically think about the history of North American and European countries in relation to the countries and communities we work with – especially the colonial relationship. It is our goal to *empower* communities and eventually transition out of communities so that they can continue to grow without Global Brigades. We are not taking resources or exploiting people. We only work with communities that request to work with us and we partner with them to achieve their health and development goals.

Are we imposing our culture or will on communities?

Ultimately, we are providing opportunity and working in collaboration for empowerment. Community members are not forced to participate in our projects and we do not work with communities that have not invited us to work with them. For our sustainable development projects, each family must have buy-in for the project (either through labour, material, money, or a combination). We believe we are addressing basic human rights, not forcing beliefs on communities.



Why do you only work in Honduras, Panama and Nicaragua? Does Global Brigades intend to expand to other countries?

We do not intend to expand to any more countries. It is important for us to focus in a few areas so that we can do our best work there. We do not want to stretch ourselves too thin and provide sub-par projects.

Isn't it better to just send money?

Our organization is based on collaboration and exchange of ideas. If students only send money, this exchange cannot happen. When we did research into which country in Africa to start Global Brigades in, we found that many community members felt isolated. They welcome students into their communities because it is an opportunity to meet people that they would not otherwise meet. Most of the community members we work with are unable to travel out of their community let alone their country. Students going on brigades also get to see exactly where their funds are going. However, if anyone wants to donate to Global Brigades and not go on a brigade, they are more than welcome to!

Where is the money going? Who profits?

The CEO's budget presentation is available on our website. All Global Brigades entities undergo third party financial audits. Our administration costs are less than 6%, including 2% credit card fees. We do not have an office in North America or Europe and no employee makes a six figure income. Any surplus funds go towards our Sustainable Transition Projects (primarily water and microfinance projects).

Aren't you doing a lot of environmental harm with so many students flying to these countries?

Yes, this is a negative aspect of international development that involves volunteers from other countries. Each volunteer must get on multiple airplanes to participate in the program. In the future, it may be possible for us to seek funding to offset our carbon footprint. Our eco-stoves and reforestation projects may even contribute to offsetting our carbon footprint one day.

What if you are giving out chronic medications and individuals cannot get refills?

We have brigades set up in communities every three to four months so that we can continually serve communities. Most of our communities do have some access to local doctors, hours away where they can get refills.

Do students treat patients?

No - students shadow and help with all the clinic stations. It is our policy that no one can perform a task that they are not licensed to do in their home country.