The impact of volunteer tourism on local communities: A managerial perspective

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Abstract

Volunteer tourism, as a potential tool for community development and sustainability, has been gaining the attention of researchers for the past decade. However, little empirical research exists about the impact of this activity on the host communities from the managerial point of view. The research, based on a qualitative study of managers' opinions from volunteer tourism organizations' leading programs worldwide, not only emphasizes the impacts of voluntourism but also suggests moving from a top-down style of volunteering to a cocreation process. Contradictions emerge from the discourses of managers regarding the positive, negative, and long-term impacts of voluntourism, and managerial implications are suggested.

KEYWORDS

cocreation, host communities, volunteer tourism, VT organizations

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Brown (2005), volunteer overseas travel began around 1915. Since its beginnings, this form of tourism has continued to develop, with millions of people worldwide traveling each year to volunteer in other countries (Hartman, Morris Paris, & Blache-Cohen, 2014). Thus, volunteer tourism (VT), or voluntourism, appears to be a growing trend in travel (Wearing, 2004). Today, it is one of the fastest growing markets in the tourism industry (Lupoli, 2013; Lupoli, Morse, Bailey, & Schelhas, 2014). Currently, this market represents more than $2 billion annually (Biddle, 2016). The desire to experience unusual travels, the lessening of barriers for international mobility, and the growing income of the current middle class are factors that have fostered its growth (Singh, 2014). In a very short time, voluntourism has become a "mass niche" market thanks to the growth in volunteer projects, the variety of destinations that offer this product, the wide range of market segments that can be attracted, the type of stakeholders involved, and the increasing competition (Novelli, 2005).

In recent years, research about voluntourism has also increased. Many efforts have been made to understand the mechanisms and consequences of these activities, most

of them focusing on the consumer perspective (Boluk, Kline, & Stroobach, 2016; Brown, 2005; McGehee, 2012). However, empirical research on the impacts and implications of VT on communities is still limited. Lupoli (2013) contributed to this, but little research has been done on the role of VT organizations (Benson & Henderson, 2011; Benson & Wearing, 2012). Coghlan (2008) also agrees with this: literature on this subject has not paid attention, for example, to the origins and objectives of these organizations.

As existing literature on this area is divided when it comes to the effects of VT on host communities and other volunteers, this paper attempts to provide a better understanding of this phenomenon. Specifically, the aim of this research is to explore the arguments and opinions of a stakeholder that has largely been overlooked in studies on this subject and that is directly involved with the development of VT activities at destinations: managers of VT organizations. Indeed, the managers are at the crossroads between local communities, volunteers, and the expectations of other stakeholders such as governments and donors. According to Hanson Pastran (2014), VT operators are important stakeholders in creating opportunities to overcome dominant structures such as colonialism that are part of the "problems" faced by local communities. In this context, putting the focus of the research on the managers seems relevant to address VT and its impacts, but it also identified contradictions at work in the phenomenon. This work seeks to understand how they perceive VT practices and its effects on the local destination, identifying not only benefits but also negative consequences of this activity. It also explores the role of managers in moving from top-down volunteering to a cocreation process of VT development.

Exploring the long-term impacts of voluntourism activities and an increased understanding of how host communities are affected by these well-intentioned practices may ensure that VT remains a sustainable practice.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Understanding VT

Initially, tourism and work were viewed as entirely independent and sometimes even opposite activities. However, in the 1970s and 1980s, terms such as "working holidays" (Cohen, 1973) and "farm tourism" (Pearce, 1990) started to appear in literature, making reference to the existence of forms of tourism that combined leisure with some sort of working component (López-Guzmán Guzmán, Millán Vázquez de la Torre, & Melián Navarro, 2007).

In 2000, Uriely and Reichel established three types of tourists that combined leisure and work in their travels: business travelers, long-term travelers, and people on working holidays. The latter refers to tourists who travel abroad for a short period to work and get to know a different country (López-Guzmán Guzmán et al., 2007). In

other words, they pay to work. We refer to this form of tourism as "voluntourism" or "VT." It was defined by Wearing (2001) as a form of tourism in which travelers participate in organized volunteering activities in order to have a vacation experience that benefits local communities.

2.2. Key stakeholders

In order to understand voluntourism, the literature analyzes key stakeholders such as the volunteer tourist. For example, there are studies that pay attention to different travelers' motivations. Wearing (2001) explains that tourists take part in projects to alleviate poverty, restore the environment, or conduct research about the society or environament of the places they visit. Although altruism can be one driver, there are many other motives (Mustonen, 2007). VT, as a form of leisure, can also be associated with ego-enhancement and self-benefit (Wright, 2014), where personal needs are the main force of action. From this multiplicity of drivers, a wide variety of volunteer vacation options are available in the market, ranging from agricultural, conservation, education, construction, medical, community development, or preservation of history (Wymer, Self, & Findley, 2010).

Moreover, there is also literature that studies the personal effects of voluntourism on the volunteers (Lupoli, 2013). On the one hand, volunteers can benefit from a genuine educational experience and gain knowledge and cross-cultural experience. On the other hand, voluntourism contributes to the professional development and personal growth of the participants. In addition, the opportunity for self-reflection that volunteers have during these programs allows them to be more critical and develop self-awareness, as well as awareness of the world's principal problems (Lupoli, 2013). In this way, this kind of activities inspire participants to get more involved with environmental or social issues (Sin, Oakes, & Mostafanezhad, 2015), which can in turn help provide more long-term benefits (McGehee & Andereck, 2008) such as an increase in participation in social movements.

Prior studies also analyze VT organizations. In 2008, Coghlan, for instance, suggested a classification of organizations according to their conservation purposes. Then, in 2008, she also explored the key role of the staff of voluntourism organizations in a successful customer experience. López-Guzmán Guzmán et al. (2007) also suggest diferent activities VT organizations should conduct: design, managing products and demand following a sustainable approach, ensuring an organized and structured offer with a defined target market and effective marketing strategies to promote it, training volunteers, and mediating with the local community. Wearing, McDonald, and Ponting (2005) analyzes the importance of NGOs when talking about VT and its impact on local people. Along the same lines, McGehee (2012) also highlights the significant role of VT organizations and networks in social change and human emancipation (for both residents and tourists). Palacios (2010), from a more critical perspective, highlights positive and realistic goals of these organizations such as "intercultural understanding" but recommends not linking the projects with a bogus "development aid discourse." In this regard, VT organizations are important stakeholders, their managers partially or totally directing the way they develop volunteering and the relationship with the projects and communities.

Host communities are another key stakeholder analyzed by research on VT. For example, Millán Vázquez de la Torre, López-Guzmán Guzmán, and Caridad y Ocerín (2007) explain that the main levels on which host communities benefit are economic followed by social, with virtually no environmental benefits whatsoever. Along the same lines, McGehee (2012) also suggests that voluntourism can have a positive impact on local communities such as resource mobilization, participation in social movements, and social change.

For some authors, voluntourism can be a strategy to develop the destination involved (Benson & Wearing, 2012) and a "tool for International development" because it fosters the tourist's engagement with the host community (Wearing, 2001). The creation of these relationships between the locals and volunteers can increase the mobilization of necessary resources, but most importantly, it can provide an opportunity for the exchange of thoughts and raising awareness of existing issues, which in the long term helps foster social change (McGehee, 2012). Authors such as Kontogeorgopoulos (2014) are careful when talking about voluntourism as a tool for development, but he highlights the importance of these activities as an International form of community service.

Research conducted in Nicaragua by Millán Vázquez de la Torre et al. (2007) also has a positive view of VT. VT shares many of the benefits that other forms of mainstream tourism bring to the destinations, such as the generation of employment, income from foreign exchange, the development of handcraft and artisan industries, creating awareness about the importance of heritage conservation, improvement in literacy rates, and an increase in revenue of the host nation's government (Singh, 2014). Added to this, VT provides more economic benefits than other types of tourism, because it presents a more direct injection of revenue to the local communities (McGehee & Andereck, 2008).

Additionally, volunteering tourists are free labor for the host communities. Brown (2005) gives an example of this when she mentions that ecotourists could act as a free workforce to maintain sustainable development efforts. This participation of travelers implies many benefits for the destinations, such as cross-cultural understanding, transmission of knowledge, and preservation of the community and environment (Lupoli et al., 2014). This is reaffirmed by McGehee and Andereck (2008), who state that the cross-cultural interactions that take place in VT can foster mutual understanding, as well as understanding of international issues among volunteers. In this way, we can see that cross-cultural issues require attention and efforts and that they are not omitted when organizations undertake this kind of programs (Wearing, 2004). Moreover, VT can help strengthen the local organizations and entities involved in tourism (López-Guzmán Guzmán et al., 2007).

However, scientific opinion is divided regarding the impacts of voluntourism (McGehee, 2012), and some literature highlights its negative consequences. For example, voluntourism can be analyzed as a trendy way of traveling where people in a good economic situation pay attention to those in disadvantaged situations. It also puts stress on somewhat rare resources. Thus, participants in VT can drain important resources such as drinkable water, energy, and food that could otherwise be used by the local community (McGehee & Andereck,2008). This is also mentioned by Singh (2014), who noted a use of local resources exceeding their capacity.

Lupoli (2013) agrees with this, mentioning that one negative impact that concerns researchers is the commodification of voluntourism. The commodification process is about transformin material or nonmaterial production into a good that can be bought and sold through an exchange process focused on the exchange value of the good (Shepherd, 2002). Tourism transforms the socioeconomical relationships to bring into market exchange amenities that were not market-based before, such as landscape, culture, fragile ecosystems, and even, as in VT, social problems and poverty (Jeannite & Lapointe, 2016). Therefore, local communities can slowly become the product sold to tourism, via a tour operator.

At the same time, VT could lead to the underestimation of the dignity of the host communities (Singh, 2014) and this can create overdependency of the local community on the volunteers. Negative effects such as the neglect of the needs and desires of the local population (as priority is given to volunteers' needs), the poor quality of the work performed by volunteers, or a decrease in employment opportunities for the locals all help to create dependency on the volunteers in the host communities (Lupoli, 2013). Added to this, locals in the host communities often lack a complete understanding of the objectives and the programs implemented by VT organizations, which can also prevent them from participating effectively and reaping the benefits of VT (Singh, 2014).

A negative impact on local customs and values may also occur. According to Maldonado (2005), tampering with the destination's culture for commercial reasons weakens the destination's autonomy and sustainable development: the diminishing of its own traditional economic activities, deterioration of the host community's sacred places, abandonment of the host culture's customs and traditions, the introduction and spread of diseases the host community does not have the resources to control, the introduction of harmful habits such as smoking, alcohol, drugs, or prostitution, or the excessive demand placed on natural resources and the resulting damage to the environament (Maldonado, 2005). There is a big risk such practices will deteriorate the environment of the destination (López-Guzmán Guzmán et al., 2007).

In addition, research has shown that plenty of volunteer programs around the world do not require that their volunteers have the skills that are necessary for the activities that they travel to perform. A study conducted by McGehee and Andereck (2008) demonstrates the lack of control in the selection of volunteers and in matching their skills against the needs of the host communities. Kontogeorgopoulos (2014) explains that tourists' motivations are indeed related to individual drivers instead of being related to a real contribution to local development. Romanticizing and trivializing issues such as poverty and playing down the importance of dramatic situations can be a negative effect of VT (Lupoli, 2013; Simpson, 2004). Volunteers can have a romantic idea of doing good when in reality they are not helping at all. Even worse, local people can be persuaded to collaborate with this kind of tourism, for instance, "filling" orphanages with their children just to satisfy demand. This is also called the "dark side of volunteer tourism" (MacKinnon, 2009).

Therefore, if not managed correctly, VT may do more harm than good. We would like to stress the importance of analyzing the perspective of the managers who make decisions about VT. Thus, certain dimensions should be taken into account to ensure long-term positive impacts such as programs aligned with local needs, transparency, economic equity, autonomy, maximization of local ownership in order to empower local

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communities, or economic benefits for locals that can also cover the costs to the local community resulting from the presence of tourists (Hartman et al., 2014; Mowforth & Munt, 2009). This requires a look at the cocreation paradigm (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2014). Indeed, Ramaswamy and Ozcan (2014) stress the fact that values are not only created in the organization from a top-down perspective, from a conception of market process, but also with the interaction of multiple stakeholders' interests and values. Although the cocreation paradigm in tourism is mostly rooted in the relationship between tourists and the businesses offering experience-based products (Binkhorst & Dekker, 2009), it can also be seen as a way to empower communities (Guimont & Lapointe, 2016), especially host communities (Guimont, Lapointe, & Sévigny, 2017; Lapointe, Guimont, & Sevigny, 2014). This last perspective appears to be relevant to the context of VT where organizations in the North interact with communities and NGOs in the host communities. The cocreation in this research will therefore refer to the relationship and interactions between the VT organization's managers and the host communities, mostly before and after the experience of the voluntourist with the host communities, but also through the voluntourist at the moment of the experience. The qualitative design of the research identified cocreation when the manager talks about the involvement of the communities in the setting up of the volunteering project and experience, in the needs assessment and in participation in the projects. Terms such as collaboration, involvement, and participation were also associated with the cocreation of projects for host communities. We understand that collaboration and cocreation are not similar, but the different forms of involvement of the host communities described by respondents suggested cocreation as a process to structure the voluntourism initiative as beneficial for host communities.

Figure 1 presents the main concepts and stakeholders involved in this type of tourism, and how they are linked, in order to conduct a more in-depth analysis of the managers' perceptions on the impact of VT on host destinations in future sections.
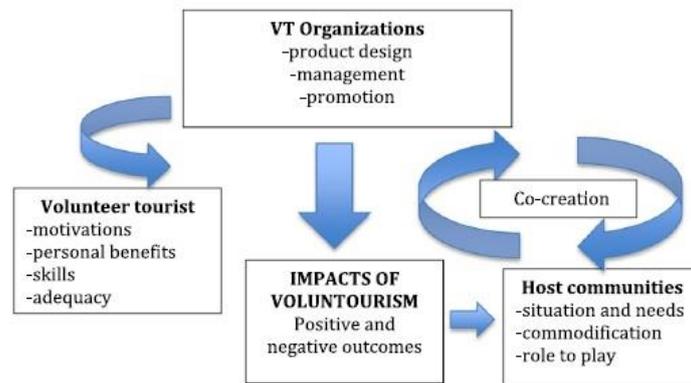

FIGURE 1   Conceptual framework on voluntourism from a managerial perspective. VT = volunteer tourism [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

3. METHODOLOGY

In order to explore managers' perceptions on the impact of voluntourism on the host communities in depth, a qualitative approach was adopted. As the literature suggests, qualitative methodologies provide flexibility and adaptability to the research project (Carson, Gilmore, Perry, & Gronhaug, 2001) and facilitate the exploration of

individuals' thoughts, emotions, and feelings (De Ruyter & Scholl, 1998; Silverman, 1998).

Hence, in-depth interviews were judged as an appropriate data collection method. Specifically, 15 in-depth interviews, each lasting approximately 60 to 80 min, were conducted with managers of VT organizations and nonprofit organizations in order to get a more indepth sense of how the effects of voluntourism are perceived by this stakeholder. Participants were contacted via telephone and Skype between February and June of 2016. Their names will not be disclosed in order to maintain the participants' privacy and to respect their wishes to remain confidential.

Fifteen cases were not extreme, but were chosen based on their current activities and their varied years of experience managing volunteer tourists worldwide (from 1 to 25 years in the sector), as well as their willingness to take part in the study. The first 10 contacts were established through professional contacts at our university and partner universities. These first participants assisted us in contacting five more managers through their own professional networks.

VT organizations that were selected to participate all have an international presence in the field, each working with three or more destinations. A series of VT guide books, articles, and reports were consulted in order to identify which were the most popular destinations for volunteering vacations (Brodowsky & Federation, 2010; Hindle, Cavalieri, Collinson, Miller, & Richard, 2007; McMillon, Cutchins, & Geissinger, 2012). The selected entities are based in the United States, Canada, Spain, the Dominican Republic, and Chile; they conduct VT programs in Costa Rica, Ecuador, Chile, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Kenya, Zambia, Morocco, Ghana, Cambodia, Laos, India, and Vietnam. Moreover, participants were selected from organizations that develop different types of VT activities such as the construction of homes, child education, or aid to hospitals and orphanages.

As the impacts of voluntourism have not previously been analyzed in detail from the point of view of managers, a data-driven approach was considered. This means the progress of the research project was guided by data and not by prior theories, experiences, or intuition. Hence, the interviews were loosely framed around a number of questions: how managers manage their projects and how managers perceive impacts on host communities, including negative and positive perceptions. Participants, however, were free to raise and explore issues they considered important to their experiences.

Interviews were conducted and transcribed in English and Spanish, depending on the interviewees' native language. All interviews were examined using the computer-assisted qualitative analysis software Nvivo. The procedures of open, axial, and selective coding (Gibbs, 2002) were employed with the purpose of reaching a deeper understanding of the interview data. The number of interviews was decided upon according to the principal of saturation, which states that data collection should end when no new categories emerge from the data (Silverman, 1998). As qualitative data and procedures cannot be validated through statistical techniques, systematic actions for verification of the research process were applied. These include adequacy, maintaining an audit trail throughout the study, two separate coders, a high level of

fitness of the method with theory and reality, and a highly understandable language (Glaser & Strauss, 1968; Morse, 1994).

One of the limitations of the research comes from the fact that cocreation was an emergent concept from the analysis of the discourses of VT organization managers. Therefore, the research design was not built to directly assess bottom-up cocreation processes between VT organizations and host communities, but to analyze the autoreflexive social construction of managers. Future research will need to look directly at cocreation processes in VT to identify how the process works, the successes and shortcomings of VT designed in cocreation, and the role and impacts on host communities of working this way with VT organizations and the volunteers they send to the host communities.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In order to discuss managers' perceptions, the results of the interviews were divided into three categories: the first two are the negative and positive impacts of VT for the host community, and the possibility of reaping long-term benefits from VT. The third is about the contradictions in their discourses, which illustrate the difficult situation managers are in, between volunteer tourists and local communities.

4.1. Positive impact of VT for the host communities

The literature states that VT may positively impact host destinations. For instance, considering the economic dimension, this type of tourism can contribute to the economic growth of the host community (Sin et al., 2015). Respondent #2 comments in his interview that

> *a lot of volunteers go into the town and spend money at the local grocery store, local restaurants, local shops and souvenir stores. I think we brought a tremendous amount of money to the community, which has created new jobs.*

Thus, as research in tourism has widely demonstrated, VT may increase revenues, activate the local economy, and generate employment opportunities (López-Guzmán Guzmán et al., 2007), and managers of VO are aware of their role expanding economic opportunities.

Along the same lines, one of the expected outcomes of sustainable development is to empower communities through voluntourism plans and to encourage them to work autonomously (López-Guzmán Guzmán et al., 2007). The following quote demonstrates that a sustainable economy is present in managers' agendas: "The goals

that are set for all projects include a self-reliant and sustainable economy, always creating a positive impact" (Respondent #9).

Besides the influence on the local economy, several positive impacts that are mentioned by respondents are of a social nature, such as the strengthening of the community, enhancing education, or improving the quality of life of residents. For instance, Respondent #5 explained that their organization "has created around 6,000 permanent housing communities." In this sense, social housing helps to provide affordable housing for those residents. Respondent #1 also mentioned benefits related to the development of the community in areas such as education: "Volunteer tourism helps by increasing class attendance in a school or providing new ways of teaching, for example."

Lupoli et al. (2014) stated that an important positive impact of VT is that it fosters the engagement of tourists and communities, promoting a mutually beneficial relationship. Local people participate actively in operational activities for the projects and promote their culture among guests (Uriely, Reichel, & Ron, 2003). The results agree with this, mentioning involvement of the community in the volunteer activities and cross-cultural understanding as two of its main benefits:

> *People (the community) start to trust foreigners again. I would say that that's the main thing: to have the capacity to get to a community and be able to work together with their people and their authorities, as one team. (Respondent #7)*

Respondent #1 also highlights that volunteers and local people working together can have many positive social impacts:

> *International volunteering helps to dignify a community. The communities we work with are isolated, and they feel excluded from society. Having outsiders from different privileged backgrounds help the local society realize that they are actually people like them …. They collaborate with them, they laugh with them, they get sick like them. It's an important motivational factor for the people in the community.*

Finally, it cannot be ignored that VT provides exposure to issues at hand, and helps create global awareness of those situations (Sin et al., 2015), promoting a positive social global change (Zahra & McIntosh, 2007). Voluntourism may inspire tourists back home to continue to volunteer and support these type of organizations and destinations (McGehee & Andereck, 2008). Our results also highlight these positive consequences: "Volunteers return home changed, with a new perspective of the world" (Respondent #3).

4.2.   Negative consequences of VT

Although many managers of VT organizations generate projects on a sustainable and long-term basis, it sometimes seems that reality does not match up with planned actions and expectations. Thus, diferent negative facets of VT can be distinguished in managers' answers. For example, it can occur that volunteers have almost no positive effects on the local community. Problems that communities face are usually complex, and volunteers just can only help with superficial issues (Conran, 2011).

As the literature suggests, volunteers' lack of skills and knowledge appear as one of the main constraints to making a significant contribution to the destination (Garrison, 2015; Kontogeorgopoulos, 2014). As Respondent #1 explains, "about 5% /10% of volunteers needed more training in the field, they weren't well prepared." However, although the managers interviewed seemed aware of this problem, some companyies explain that they do not offer training to volunteers before they go out into the field.

In a study conducted by Coghlan (2008), expedition staff from VT organizations were interviewed, and surprisingly, they did not consider the issue of reinforcing capacities of the volunteers through training or feedback. Regarding this issue, our respondents explain that in many cases, they do not have time to train participants. Respondent #2 clarified that the problem is linked to the short duration of the stay:

> *One drawback is the training element. If you're only there*
> *for 2 weeks and it takes 1 or 2 days to train people, then*
> *that's a big resource drain, and then you don't necessarily*
> *get the return on your investment that you would if*
> *someone was there for a month.*

As the literature explains, the lack of volunteer training can be detriment al to the development of the programs but even worse for the host community. This situation leads to wasted and underutilized resources for the volunteer (Garrison, 2015), as well as for the organization and the destination. Organizations as well as local people should train volunteers on different issues such as active participation, cultural exchanges, and sustainable development (Hartman et al., 2014).

Thus, what destinations need and what volunteers can offer sometimes do not match up. Respondent #9 pointed out that "sometimes volunteers don't meet the expectations of the hosting organization." Indeed, voluntourism organizations might be not aware of what volunteers want (Blackman & Benson, 2010) and how they can really contribute to the project. In addition, companies seem to tend to lessen the importance of their actions as key stakeholders in the tourism system: "We need to be humble about our self-importance in terms of failure. Just one volunteer can't destroy the Amazon! There's only a certain level of impact-capacity that a person has, or a group of people has" (Respondent #15).

Another negative consequence that may arise from voluntourism is the commodification of the field where organizations conduct their projects. Lupoli (2013) mentions that the risk of commodification can lead to overusage of the host

destination's natural resources. Respondent #1 agrees with this, and states that the fear of commodification was actually one of the factors that drove him to work on this issue. He elaborated, saying "the tourism industry was corrupting the field of international volunteering in a way that was obviously out of someeconomic interest …. Tourism is always focused on having tourists being served by locals." The value exchange among tourists, local people, and organizations is sometimes not clear. Thus, VT programs may end up only benefiting organizations instead of local people (Coren & Gray, 2012).

Respondent #2 also reflected on the commodification around VT. He highlighted commodification as a big risk that all the stakeholders involved in voluntourism should think about:

> *A big question is the commodification issue: how are we going to manage the evolution of sustainable, smallscale volunteer tourism to a system when for-profit organizations are looking around saying "I want benefits from this"? What about when there are companies which offer a for-profit volunteer experience where you stay in a swanky multinational hotel, you're eating anything that resembles local food, and you're just engaging for 1 hour in the volunteer experience and not really getting immersed in it? How are we going to prevent that? Can we even prevent that and keep nurturing the spirit of volunteer tourism based on cultural awareness, resource maximization, and sustainability that we're trying to hold on to?*

In line with this, the literature mentions that the dependency of locals on volunteer programs can be a very negative consequence of such activities (Singh, 2014). International aid can end up being a problema for the local economy (Hanson Pastran, 2014).

Respondent #8 confirms this, saying that "sometimes the locals become accustomed to receiving everything from the organizations. They think it's your responsibility to give them everything." However, managers explain that they take actions to prevent these negative consequences. Respondent #3 declared that

> *We want to provide something that will stay with the community and its people for a lifetime. We don't want to create a dependency, so our thought is that education is the most sustainable way to make a difference for the community. For example, English education can provide them with opportunities for better jobs.*

From this, it can be observed that the relationship between stakeholders is complex and may vary according the context. Criticism and social tension among volunteers, organizations, and residents can appear (Mittelberg, 1988; Uriely et al., 2003). The following quotation is an example of this issue: "We discovered local people were

stealing our funds. That was our most negative experience," explains Respondent #9. Respondent #5 also describes conflictive situations VT organizations have to face:

> *There are communities that don't want to work with the organization …. We think we're doing the right thing and you want to help them, but we were met with closed doors: politicians have sent the police to prohibit us from working in specific places, and there are companies whose land we have worked on, and then we discovered things that maybe weren't so positive ….*

Respondent #7 described a similar situation, where they were unable to develop the full project due to social constraints that the organizations ran into:

> *We worked in a community where we made 100 houses and we weren't able to provide the proper follow-up or social rehabilitation plans …. We haven't returned. The place was really dangerous and in need of community …. The only thing we left behind is the construction of houses and nothing more.*

We can also see that an assistance-based model replicates the parameters of "hard-core poverty" that can arise from VT. Thus, as the literature explains, this type of tourism can be a form of neocolonialisme where saviors and unprotected "others" appear (Hall & Tucker, 2005; Hanson Pastran, 2014; Palacios, 2010) and where the gap between rich and poor is still present (Mostafanezhad, 2014).

4.3.   Possibility of reaping long-term benefits from VT

Some companies interviewed claim that a long-term approach to sustainable tourism is possible. As Respondent #3 explains, long-term benefits should be planned to have a significant impact on locals: "We have a principle called 'step by step'. It's about the short-term volunteers who come week after week, who become a large chain of people who are making an impact on the community." Thus, long-term benefits can come from short-term volunteering activities. Although some volunteers only stay at the location for a short period of time, volunteering organizations may manage a continuous flow of volunteers and finally achieve their mission.

Respondent #2 comments that "they may be short-term volunteers, but they're engaged in more strategic and long-term activities. If planned activities don't change from week to week and just the people do, then the initiative is still there, the mission is still there." Thus, all participants agree that whether or not VT is beneficial depends mostly on how the organization manages it. As Palacios (2010) explains, organizations that develop short-term placements have to closely match volunteers' expectations, real capacities, and project goals in order to obtain positive outcomes.

When asked about what VT organizations do in order to ensure long-term impacts, managers answer that sustainability strategy is key to their performance. As a result, they try to foster it by collaborating with the community and engaging them in their activities: "When you're doing this type of work, it's important to have locals who can support the work you're doing, people who we can turn to and ask 'what's the real need here?'," explains Respondent #3. This agrees with López-Guzmán Guzmán et al. (2007): for VT to be effective in the long run, there has to be open communication and collaboration between all stakeholders.

Most of the managers interviewed are aware of the importance of creating programs based on the real needs of communities and where research on the area is fundamental. Respondent #9 explains that

> *often, the host communities already have the idea to be developed, but they lack the knowledge or resources. That's when we step in, analyze the situation and create projects that meet those needs that can be selfsustained in the future.*

Along the same lines, McGehee and Andereck (2008) also suggest that for a VT project to be successful in bettering the host community, they need to be allowed to participate, and the overall direction of the programs needs to be in the hands of the community. Some of the respondents agree with this: "If there's a board of directors that consists of engaged community residents, then I think there certainly are opportunities for volunteer tourism to be effective. It has to be driven by the community" (Respondent #2). As the literature explains, taking into account the community's voice and promoting its participation is essential when designing and executing VT programs (Hartman et al., 2014). In addition, according to one manager, the community should also be considered in the evaluation processes: "They're the best ones to tell us if we're doing our job well, if they value our work or not" (Respondent #4).

The literature explains that VT organizations focused only on profit maximization have not succeeded. In general, managers are aware that sustainability and social responsibility are the key values that these companies have to follow in order to get to the top (Benson & Henderson, 2011).

Indeed, the managers interviewed employ cocreation in their VT experiences and products without directly naming it. They identified collaboration with the local communities as essential in securing positive impacts and results for the community. As Respondent #1 explained, before creating new programs, they investigate by "talking to local organizations about all kinds of issues, seeing if there's a place for volunteers to do something." Furthermore, Respondent #9 explained how their organization creates projects from areas of necessity identified by the communities themselves, stating that

> *often, the host communities already have the idea to be developed, but they lack the knowledge or resources. That's when we step in, analyze the situation and create projects that meet those needs that can be selfsustained in the future.*

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Other managers agreed with this, stating that the evaluation of the programs was also a decisive factor for being able to measure progress. All of them admitted to conduct evaluation in collaborationwith the community. Respondent #1 also mentioned that their Organization involved the local community in their evaluation processes, commenting "we're in constant communication with our local team and with the volunteers. We say 'we can improve this, or that, or the organization isn't ready for this, etc.'." Respondent #4 agreed with the importance of turning to the host communities for evaluation, saying "they're the best ones to tell us if we're doing our job well, if they value our work." Moreover, most organizations mentioned that one of their goals, or their main goal, was to be able to eventually leave the destination, leaving the direction of the project and the community to the locals. However, the managers' discourses do not address the issue of a differential power relationship in this cocreation process. Therefore, there is still the risk of structuring the cocreation process using a disempowering and dependency relationship with the VT organization. This risk is also embedded within the contradictions in the managers' discourses.

The first contradiction in the manager's discourses is about the issue of having a long-term impact on the communities. Indeed, on the one hand, the shortcomings of the volunteers are stated in terms of skills, agencies, and time in the communities and, on the other hand, in stating that the sum of many short-term unskilled volunteers creates positive impacts in the long term. It is contradictory to simultaneously state that there are limited impacts due to limited capacities and to also affirm that the continuous flow of volunteers is the source of positive impacts. It points to the economic impacts of the continuous flow of volunteers in the communities we address in two other contradictions, which are the commodification of social issues and the limited agencies of VT managers.

Indeed, as one manager states, the continuous flow of volunteers brings long-term impacts, step by step, but also brings a regular flow of money in the communities. This flow is stated as one impact on the economic development of the communities. It is a situation where sustainable development is contingent on a sustainable flow of volunteers, therefore questioning the actual desire and capacity to find sustainable solutions for the development issues addressed by VT organizations. As Britton (1991) pinpoints, tourism is a powerful commodification process. In the case of VT, it does contribute to the new spirit of capitalism (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2006) where more and more spheres of life are turned into commodities. Indeed, VT organizations offer trips to act on and address social issues, when solving them would threaten the very survival of the organization. On the other hand, the flow of unskilled, short-term volunteers hardly helps excepte in bringing a continuous economic flow to the communities, reproducing a colonial-like dependency. Surprisingly, the managers are very aware of these contradictions, bringing up the actual agency capacities of the VT manager.

The two previous contradictions lead us to ask why the VT managers can directly pinpoint these contradictions but cannot address the situation. As major stakeholders, they can reflect critically on their work but still perpetuate a dialectical situation where dependency and commodification are reproduced despite a will to address these issues. From the discourses of the manager, we can question the actual agency of those managers. Their discourse testifies to a strong agency in the actual management of the organization but a limited one on the actual issues their volunteers are supposed to address. Therefore, they justify their relevance as stakeholders through a continuous

economic presence in the destination community. This calls for more research on the agency of managers as stakeholders.

5. CONCLUSIONS

VT organizations are crucial actors for voluntourism development. Many aspects on both the strategic and operational level depend on them. From this, a formal and professional approach should be adopted for all the VT organizations involved in this type of tourism. They must implement, for example, ethical standards such as promoting fair trade learning (Hartman et al., 2014). As López-Guzmán Guzmán et al. (2007) explains, their role should be better defined regarding, for example, strategy, management, marketing, sustainability, and social aspects. Responsible marketing is key to avoid greenwashing and inconsistencies between what they offer when they sell their products and what they are in reality (Smith & Font, 2014).

In spite of multiple negative impacts such as economic and social dependency, voluntourism can also bring long-term benefits if addressed in a responsible and sustainable way. For instance, it is important to involve the community in the planning and management of VT programs. Respondents explained how each of their organizations worked with partners in the local communities who were involved in the decision-making and development of programs. Regardless of the area of expertise of the VT organization, the overall goal is to respect locals: not treating them as victims, but raising awareness and empowering them to be their own saviors. Cocreation can be an effective way of developing this type of tourism.

The experience of cocreation generates value for customers, companies, and destinations, moving from an innovation just based on fun and entertainment toward a value proposition based on personal, cultural, and social values (Binkhorst, 2006). Thus, cocreation helps to enhance and highlight the uniqueness and authenticity of a place, and it can also change the way tourists interact and dialog with companies when designing and developing the tourism experience (Binkhorst, 2006, 2008). Customers want to create their own meaningful VT experiences. For example, in agri-voluntourism, tourists become producers. Hence, tourists enjoy and pay for agricultural experiences where they coproduce, cocreate, and consume the tourism product (Everett, 2016). This is also called "prosumption," where production and consumption occur at the same time (Pappalepore, Maitland, & Smith, 2014). Cocreation in the tourism industry between locals and tourists is possible. There are several examples of organizations that facilitate the interaction between residents and customers, where visitors create their own experiences (Binkhorst & Dekker, 2009; Guimont & Lapointe, 2016; Lapointe et al., 2014).

The alliances and inclusive partnership between the different stakeholders of the destination determine whether public and private organizations and civil society will be key to sustainable development. Developing countries need not only short-term but also long-term goals. Managers perceive short-term VT as an important tool for creating awareness of current issues within the host communities, and for providing a steady workforce flow for volunteering and nonprofit organizations. However, without long-term volunteers and organizations that are present and continuously leading

these activities, it would be difficult to reap any relevant benefit. Thus, comprehensive strategic management should be implemented by companies, taking into account their vision and mission and mainly considerin community's needs, prioritizing objectives and setting aside superfluous issues such as only attracting potential volunteers-clients.

6. LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

One challenge when conducting research in the field of VT is establishing a scale that is large enough to be representative, but small enough to be manageable (McGehee, 2012). Geographical location also poses a challenge, because the places where VT programs take place are often in remote locations, which made active potential participants harder to reach, further limiting the sample.

Moreover, although voluntourism is a growing trend, volunteer tourists often do not perceive themselves as tourists, but believe that what they do is a special kind of tourism or even something entirely different from tourism (Lupoli, 2013). The same contradiction also emerged when interviewing managers. During the research process, an overall negative connotation toward the term "tourism" in VT became evident both in the literature and within potential participants. Because of this, some potential interviewees refused to participate in the investigation, as they had no interest in being associated with the term "tourist." In addition, as the managers interviewed represent the interests of companies, it is difficult to obtain deeper information regarding the negative effects of voluntourism on the host communities.

In order to refute the conceptualization of voluntourism as an oxymoron (the union of two totally opposite words), it is necessary to rethink what a volunteer tourist is, the positive and negative predisposition towards the term tourism, and about reinterpreting the consequences of linking tourism and volunteer activities in certain destinations. As Wearing, Young, and Everingham (2017) suggest, voluntourism should be reframed. In addition, tourists should be aware and become active participants in these discussions. Future actions should be based on professional and systematic approaches, which should also take place within a critical perspective to avoid commodification. Formal and official regulations should be provided to the destinations and organizations involved in VT in order to address social issues in decolonizing way. Tourism can be seen as a perverse activity or as a tool for progress; everything depends on the way we understand and conduct it.

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