

## **EXPLORING ACTOR-NETWORK THEORY IN A VOLUNTEER TOURISM CONTEXT: A DELICATE BALANCE DISRUPTED BY COVID-19**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Volunteer tourists seek to contribute to the life of others on a variety of projects around the world (Han et al., 2019; McGehee, 2014) while seeking a meaningful experience (Wearing, 2001). Volunteer tourism harnesses the power of simple ethical, social or environmental messages to energise tourists (Tomazos, 2022), resulting in rapid growth as it became subject to market forces (Brown, 2003; Caton & Santos, 2009; McGehee, 2002). Despite commercial success, the industry has faced criticism on various fronts, including the contributions of tourists (Lupoli et al., 2014; Tomazos & Butler, 2009; Tomazos & Cooper, 2012), local need and staging (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2017; Mostafanezhad, 2013), tourists doing more harm than good (Brown, 2003), and whether it benefits tourists more than locals (Easton & Wise, 2015; Steele et al., 2017; Tomazos & Butler, 2010, 2012). While the above criticism is well justified, there seems to be a consensus that volunteer tourism, just like any other form of tourism, should be seen as a necessary evil (Kavaratzis, 2012), a critical trade-off that should be seen in different geographical contexts, and socio-cultural prisms (Benson, 2015). There needs to be a consideration of not only what meaningful experiences can be had by volunteers but also what benefits the host community can reap. As such, it is important to explore relationships on the ground through a more balanced consideration of the different actors involved

Drawing from Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (Bilodeau & Potvin, 2018; Latour, 2005), we consider a primary actor and other agents as they interact within the context of the volunteer tourist experience in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. By demonstrating how different agents interact or collide, the paper shows how the relationships between everything in the network converge to enact the volunteer tourists' reality. This paradigm captures non-human actors like the

tourism industry, crime, corruption, and poverty as unsettled. They move from compelling and deterministic (how things are, no escape) to passive (a part of the tourism setting). In effect, they become part of the volunteer tourism paradox that pushes the boundaries of what tourism is and does. In the process, we see how these powerful actors create assertions and obstacles that become part of the everyday reality of volunteer tourists and the projects they serve as they mutually co-constitute, support, challenge and reinforce one another. The usual theme in such a process would be asking locals to imagine if the volunteers were not there. This theoretical exercise became a reality with the pandemic, showcasing the importance of international travel and the fragility of tourism landscapes (Abbas et al., 2021; Del Valle, 2020). Overall, this paper addresses two research questions: 1. How does actor-network theory relate to the volunteer tourism setting? 2. What role has the pandemic played in the sensitively balanced volunteer tourism setting?

The answer to question 1 shows how relationships develop and evolve and how tourism interests gravitate towards volunteers. This leads to a symbiotic relationship that must be protected and understood further. In addition, this paper also illustrates how actors that 'control' and serve the volunteers grow in influence as they pursue their interests while indirectly contributing (even unknowingly) to a good cause. The children served by the Home examined are also part of this symbiotic relationship. Offering a new perspective, this paper showcases how the moral panic (at times justified) surrounding orphanage tourism does not always accurately reflect the environment and the need on the ground. Finally, by employing ANT, this paper offers a symmetrical outlook that ignores assumptions about power and one-way exploitation; instead, it offers an empowering view that the locals can exploit volunteers and their good intentions for their ends.

The answer to question 2 reveals the devastating impact of Covid-19 and how it was felt by different actors in the network as they had to reconfigure their priorities given the significant

setbacks resulting from the pandemic. Further, this paper illustrates how different actors in the network felt the devastating impact of Covid-19 as they had to reconfigure their priorities given the significant setbacks resulting from the pandemic. **Armed with this insight, stakeholders on the ground will better understand their role within the network, allowing them to align their interests to the needs of volunteers and the wider community and become more resilient to future crises.**

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Volunteer Tourism**

Since its beginnings, volunteer tourism has rapidly evolved from a highly idealised form of tourism to a lucrative and commercialised form (Tomazos & Cooper, 2011). From a demand perspective, volunteers seek a meaningful experience that makes a difference (Wearing, 2001). However, from a supply perspective, organisations often consider what projects most likely entice volunteers (Benson, 2015). Wearing et al. (2017) argue that the inevitable has occurred through adaptations of volunteer tourism concerning commercialism, as well as the “domination of the touring cultures over the toured host communities” (Wearing et al., 2010). While some suggest that volunteer tourism ultimately damages host cultures, communities, and environments (Wearing et al., 2017), using ANT, we show the symbiotic relationship between what volunteers want and what the host community seeks to provide benefit from within the volunteerscape. Thus, it is crucial to explore the actors within the volunteer tourism network to understand better this sensitively balanced network, going beyond the assumption that volunteer tourist interactions are mainly shaped or determined by structural inequalities and asymmetric power relations (see, for example, Everingham & Motta, 2022; Mostafanezhad, 2013; Wearing et al., 2010). Most importantly, the use of ANT in this study

does not take social structures as a starting point but instead explores how relationships unfold on the ground through relational work.

## 2.1 An overview of ANT and its use in Tourism

The starting point of using ANT is identifying primary actors with resources. **These identified actors typically have established relationships with other actors, thus providing a network for analysis** (Lestari et al., 2020). An actor is “any element which bends space around itself, makes other elements dependent upon itself and translate their will into a language of its own” (Callon & Latour, 1981: 286). Actors are considered those in a network who shape their nature and features based on their relationship with others in the network. So, an actor can be defined as anything that acts or accepts activity from others (Jensen, 2001). In turn, a network is a series of transformations that helps actors to build relationships (Latour, 1993). In ANT, the network is used to describe the travel space (Law, 2009; Latour, 1993, 2005) and space itself (Law & Mol, 2001; Mol & Law, 1994). The network concept is relational and explains how to manage actors to make the network stable for further expansion (Callon & Latour, 1981). To identify the workings and ordering of key actors, empirical investigation ‘following the actor’ is essential (Bilodeau & Potvin, 2018; Latour, 2005). **Similarly to Dedeke (2017) and Yin (2003), a single case study methodology was used for the analysis.**

ANT has increasingly received attention in tourism studies (see Table 1) to understand the tourist setting as a relational concept (Franklin, 2014; Povilanskas & Armaitiene, 2011; Ren, 2011; Ren & Blichfeldt, 2011). In the context of volunteer tourism, ANT has been employed in one interesting study involving a children’s Home, and lice work. Benali and Ren (2019) used the concept of ontological choreography (Cussins, 1996) to deconstruct the social setting as an ongoing strenuous and fluid enactment made up of humans as well as non-

human actors underlined by mess and multiple realities (Latour, 2005; Law & Singleton, 2005; Mol, 2002; Urry, 2004). They viewed human action as a heterogeneous mesh of discourses, places and things (Callon & Law, 1997). ANT “tells stories of how relations assemble or don’t” (Law, 2009, p. 141). These stories seek not to transcribe reality but to offer an understanding of ANT as enacted through the concepts and theories applied. Using these stories and implementing ANT is crucial as it shows the complexity of the volunteer tourism setting and considers a range of actors that are often overlooked (Wearing et al., 2017). Thus, by concentrating on these actors we are able to better evaluate the relationships on the ground, and explore the agency and influence of each actor in the network regardless of their size or perceived influence (Benali & Ren, 2019).

#### TABLE 1

Just like the lice were the equalising factor between “rich volunteers” and “powerless locals” (Benali & Ren, 2019), the powerlessness of the volunteers and the agency of the locals (Tomazos & Murdy, 2023) needs to be further considered within a wider network of interdependent relationships. Our study employs ANT to explore volunteer tourism-locals’ relations with a clear understanding that actor and network cannot be defined separately (van der Duim, 2007). Using ANT, this study does not concentrate on the ‘why’; instead, it focuses on the ‘how’ to explore how social arrangements come to be (Callon, 1986). ANT offers a pragmatic view of what is happening on the ground rather than what is right or wrong. This allows us to move away from ethical dilemmas underlined by geographical compassion (Mostafanezhad, 2013) and focus on the realities of volunteer tourism and how to improve it post-pandemic. Drawing on ethnographic data and interviews, we explore how things were before the pandemic, what is expected to come, and what can no longer be for volunteer tourism in Phnom Penh and, by extension, other similar destinations. We link our

exploration to ongoing volunteer tourism controversies that paradoxically serve as anti-volunteer tourism fodder (Guiney, 2018; Guiney and Mostafanezhad, 2015). However, the activities and controversies around volunteer tourism became an afterthought when the Covid-19 pandemic rendered the setting un-visitable (Bakar & Rosbi, 2020). Consequently, future priorities and discourses entangle with the livelihood of communities in shaping and reshaping the future of volunteer tourism.

### 3. METHOD

ANT acts both as a theoretical lens and a method of inquiry that describes the processes of social change by identifying the relationships between different heterogeneous actors in practice (Beard et al., 2016; Bilodeau & Potvin, 2018; Latour, 2005) and exploring the links and connections between actors, the way the relationship works, and the ordering of relations (van der Duim et al., 2014). ANT adopts a relational perspective concerned with forming connections between the actors in the network (Sharrock & Anderson, 1986). It adds non-human entities to the network as it hinges on the premise that social order is unimaginable without including materials and technologies (Callon & Latour, 1981). ANT has three main principles; agnosticism; generalised symmetry; and the importance of the free association between actors (Farías, 2011; Tatnall & Gilding, 1999). The agnosticism principle describes that actors in the network should be treated impartially, and their descriptions should be unbiased (Rodger, 2012). The ‘general symmetry’ principle explains that human and non-human actors involved in the network are equally important (McLean & Hassard, 2004), asserting that everything should be explained or described similarly (Law, 1994). The third principle, ‘free association’ claims that heterogeneous actors can be linked through conceptual divisions such as national/international, cultural/natural, or social/natural (Burgess et al., 2000). The world is made of hybrid elements where the nature of the relationship is

complex, and no entity is purely social or natural (Burgess et al., 2000). Under this principle, we cannot assume differences between human and non-human actors in advance (Callon, 1986), and actor-networks are based on the relationship between heterogeneous actors that play equally important roles (Rodger, 2012). The prime concerns of ANT are the identification of various actors, the ways they build the network, and the process of continuation of the network (Law, 1992).

### 3.1 Context

This study investigates a specific institution in a particular context, a children's home run in Phnom Penh by Missionaries for Charity, a charitable organisation set up by Mother Teresa. The Home is situated at the heart of Phnom Penh, providing shelter for approximately 30 children. The Home receives little funding from the government and relies on unsolicited donations but has partnered with a local NGO that coordinates with international sending organisations. Prior to Covid-19, there would often be four volunteers per day using their skills to assist with daily tasks such as taking care of the children, preparing storage, essential maintenance, and assisting at the foodbank and medicine dispensary. The financial contributions of the volunteers also fund the foodbank and medicine dispensary. In some cases, this contribution was part of the placement fee and, in others, discretionary on the part of the volunteer.

A fifteen-minute tuk-tuk ride away lies the volunteer headquarters, where international volunteers engaged in a range of different projects around the city were housed. These volunteers were recruited by different international sending organisations, funnelled through one local NGO, and **at** the time of the data collection, they were predominantly from

Australia, South Africa, and the United States. The accommodation provided basic amenities, including a shared fridge, wifi, and pay-as-you-go facilities, including laundry and transport.

### **3.2 Phase One: Ethnographic fieldwork**

During an ethnographic study, there is a need for researchers to participate in the social practice under investigation (Gao et al., 2022; Lamers et al., 2017). The first author immersed themselves in the setting as a volunteer within the Home, conducting fieldwork from January 21st to March 17th, 2018. The methodology is naturalistic as the study adopts an ethnographic approach, which means that knowledge that is socially acquired and analysed is used to explain ‘observed patterns of human activity’ (Gill and Johnson, 2010: 92). Participant observation is a standard methodology with a usually inductive approach underlined by the assumption that the observant can be emotionally involved but simultaneously detached (Shaw, 1999). This assumption is challenged by work that amplifies how the self impacts the ethnographic perspective turning a such enquiry into narrative ethnography or autoethnography (Tedlock, 2005; Musante, 2015). This study, draws knowledge from observation in combination with the language used to describe the observer’s experiences. As illustrated in some of the presented findings, the researcher wrote themselves into the text and used excerpts from the research diary as part of the author’s continuous stream of consciousness as informed by the interpretation of situations (Fullagar, 2002; Philimore and Goodson, 2004), information gathering and discussions with different actors.

Regarding research reflexivity, the researcher employed strategies used by ethnographers to secure the validity of their data. Allowing for the distinct possibility of multiple interpretations and considering bias or subjectivity, the author circulated data transcripts among peer researchers to mitigate personal bias in the data coding. Next, to deliver findings



not contaminated by emotions, the researcher noted their fears, apprehensions, mistakes, misadventures, excitements, successes and disappointments. This included any guesses, hunches, suspicions or links to themes targeted for subsequent enquiry. Finally, one last measure was to employ the three questions technique (Forsey, 2010; Smit and Onwuebuzie, 2018) to quarantine or isolate any feelings that may have contaminated the analysis. This usually entails the researcher asking the following questions; what surprised me; what intrigued me; and what disturbed me. This ensures that pure observations are left, divorced from personal feelings.

The researcher interviewed the primary actor within this setting, the Head Sister, as well as her fellow sisters and other employees of the Home, **and also** the director of the local NGO who provided access to the Home. The investigation then expanded to the staff at the volunteers' accommodation, other volunteers, and small business owners who rely on the volunteers' custom (see Table 2). Next, the network extended to local recipients of the sisters' work, and one doctor from Doctors Without Borders (DWB). Most interviews were conducted in English, and when needed, the researcher was supported by a Vietnamese volunteer who spoke Khmer. *The interviews were semi-structured, and the researcher following ANT, sometimes went back and forth asking for clarifications or simply chatting.* The interviews from phase one were supplemented with a diary kept by the researcher and photographic material used as an aide-memoire, and other secondary documentation, including government documents, pamphlets and journal articles. The data collected were transformed into digital format in a 128-page document.

### **3.3 Phase Two: Post-trip/ pandemic interviews**

A second phase followed up the fieldwork in 2021 by returning to identified key actors: the Head Sister at the Home, the managers and founders of local NGOs and the CEO of a

significant volunteer tourism sending organisation (see Table 2). All participants were interviewed remotely using ZOOM before all the data was transcribed in the case study for analysis. On average, the interviews lasted about 45 minutes and covered different topics, some of which are not pertinent to this paper. The subsequent analysis uses only data related to the pandemic's effect. Inevitably, the effect of the pandemic became the focal point of phase two of the study.

TABLE 2

### 3.4 Data Analysis: The ANT Translation

After reviewing the material to familiarise ourselves with its content, we coded the raw data. During the first coding stage, we identified 55 codes before narrowing them down to nine substantive categories in the second coding stage (Maxwell, 2005). At the third and final stage of the analysis, the categories were filtered through the six phases of translation of ANT (van der Duim & Caalders, 2008) to synthesise the coding categories into theoretical categories (Dedeke, 2017; see Table 3). The translation process involves the analysis of discussion, illustration, and movement between actors and places and is often driven by identifying a primary actor, in this case, the Head Sister. It is the process of making alignment among heterogeneous actors by keeping their differences (Rodger et al., 2009). If the alignment is strong in the network, then this network becomes stable, whereas weak alignment demands frequent negotiations (Martin, 2000).

TABLE 3

ANT outlines six moments or phases defining actors' roles and the relations between actors within and between the networks (van der Duim, 2007). These moments are: the identification of problems and actors (problematization); identifying a common issue by which actors can solve the problems (Obligatory Passage Point or OPP); negotiating and convincing the actors to their mutual benefit (Interestment); the setting of roles, partnerships and alliances (Enrolment); the creation of a larger network (Mobilisation); and the eventual institutionalisation of practices and actions that underline the existence and performance of the network (Blackboxing) (Burga & Rezania, 2017; Tang et al., 2018).

#### **4. FINDINGS**

Nine themes were identified, centring on different agents, key events and their actions (examples of actions in Table 4) as they operated within the institutional environment of volunteer tourism (Thompson, 2021). Selected excerpts from the coded narratives are presented in the results section, allowing the participants' voices to emerge (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Finally, in line with using ANT, each coding category was assigned to one of the six phases (see Figure 1).

TABLE 4

FIGURE 1

##### **4.1 Defining the problem and key actors**

During the translation process, it is essential that researchers pay attention to how an actor-network came to be, which actors are involved in the actor-network, ways of maintaining the network, and the impact of other networks on the performance of the actor-network (Rodger

et al., 2009). The translation process in ANT starts with identifying problems and actors (Burga & Rezania, 2017). The study identified two key actors, namely the Head Sister, and the institution of volunteer tourism in Cambodia, as affected by the country's history and other macro and micro economic factors. Within this context, volunteer tourism plays on this narrative of need (McGloin & Georgeou, 2016; Wearing & McGehee, 2013) and fosters different interactions for the Home. Each of these interactions poses a choice in how these are enacted. It must be noted that volunteering at children's homes is now banned following a very effective campaign by Lumos and celebrities like J.K Rowling (wearelumos.org). The movement, of course, was based on a long history of Cambodia as a place where adoption was too easy, and children fell prey to predators of every kind (Carpenter, 2015; Guiney & Mostafanezhad, 2015).

*“In the past, volunteers paid crazy money to come and work at the orphanage as government officials were asking for money for access. In the past, orphanages were used for adoption, and many well-to-do foreigners would come and agree on a price with the official and then they would adopt a child. In some cases, the next day, the child, the adoption papers and passport were also delivered to their hotel room”*  
(Head Sister)

However, with pressure from international agencies, things have been improving gradually.

*“The government is investing money in children's homes and orphanages and they try to implement Western standards... is a provision/condition set by international aid donor agencies. For example, we are not allowed to keep disabled children any*

*longer, as we do not meet the criteria set. Also, all the water must be purified, and the children must be checked by a doctor twice a month” (Head Sister)*

Once the ‘golden’ era of swift adoptions ended, its infrastructure went underground. Many key facilitators found new ways to profit from the children, including fake orphanages and other schemes involving locals and well-intentioned or very dangerous westerners (Lyneham & Facchini, 2019). Letting in volunteers was a leap of faith for the Head Sister, but now she understands that the volunteers have much to offer in their own special way, both to the Home and the children.

*“Some of these children here, their parents used to lock them up, beat them up and treat them badly, that is why they take so long to warm to you. Volunteers shower them with attention. When you leave someone else will take your place. Do you want me to tell you how long it will take for the children to forget you were even here? Three days...maybe two; after that your face will just go where all other faces have come and gone. The children thrive on the attention, but they are clever enough not to get attached” (Head Sister)*

Spending time with key actors and understanding the value that volunteers bring to the children, the orphanage, and the community, allows a new perspective that contradicts the warnings about emotional attachment and the harm volunteers can do to children (Carpenter, 2016; Reas, 2015).

#### **4.3 Problematisation**

In ANT, in the problematisation phase, actors are highlighted if perceived as part of a situation, problem, or proposed solution. These actors can be human and non-human as long as they work together **in some way to** solve the problems identified to reach a common goal (Huxford, 2010; Ibrahim, 2009). While non-human actors can be construed as having no agency or motivation, this study draws on work that sees non-human actors as ‘agents’ that undermine the sets of associations that tie together the study’s social actors (Michel & Law, 1995). In this context, the tourism industry, local culture, and orphanhood, while not attributed to a particular human agent, are not passive intermediaries as they continuously retain the ability to subvert or undermine the working of the network to reach a common goal, much like the scallops did in Michel and Law’s (1995) study. In this translation phase, the study identified three non-human actors (the tourism industry, local culture, and orphanhood) and three human actors (the Head Sister, the staff at the Home, and the local NGO director who places international volunteers on projects around Phnom Penh). **Whilst most of the children hosted in these Cambodian Homes are not technically orphans (e.g., both parents dead) and therefore do not appear in the official statistics, they are nevertheless in real need of support. Relying on such statistics** leads to the convenient narrative that most orphanages are probably fake (Steinmetz & Feck, 2019) **or the commodified children are used as props to attract donations (Guiney, 2018; Guiney & Mostafanezhad, 2015; Mostafanezhad, 2013), but under closer inspection orphanages like the one in our study offer support for children when there is no safety net.**

*“Only a few of the children are completely orphans. Some of them have single mothers (father walked out), mothers with mental illness and others have parents that just left them to the sisters as they had to go and work in Thailand or Vietnam. Sometimes the parents come to see them or pick them up for the weekend, but most of*

*the children have no one, and maybe that is why the continuous supply of volunteers becomes vital” (Head Sister)*

*“Her father is a drunk and once, when she was crying, her father covered her in lighting fluid and almost set her alight...the police intervened and brought her to us”  
(Sister M)*

Hence, the narrative of fake orphanages ignores children being abandoned for different reasons, cultures and customs and business tourists who go home, potentially unaware of their own children.

*“Here they have a local custom...when a boy asks the hand of a girl in marriage, he has to bring her family \$500; so daughters are very good to keep around, but boys are not. People here are very poor; by keeping the girl they might one day bring in \$500, and by giving up the boy, they avoid having to pay \$500” (Head Sister)*

This ambiguity is further exacerbated by a culture that places a premium on girls over boys.

*“Tourists and immigrants promise things to young girls, and then they have no choice but to leave the children to the care of the sisters. I guess that explains why only one of the children has two Cambodian parents” (Local NGO Director ML)*

Second, there is an expansion of the ‘agent orange orphanage tour’ phenomenon<sup>1</sup> where buses of westerners travelling to Siem Reap visit orphanages in Phnom Penh. This tourist activity complicates the running of the Home but also provides much-needed support for the sisters’ work.

*“They are on a 3-day visit to Cambodia after visiting some Agent Orange orphanages in Vietnam. They had already visited another orphanage today and would come back to us tomorrow if they liked it. On the next day, they will leave for Siem Reap to see Angkor Wat, taking in all of Cambodia’s sights in the process”* (Research Diary Notes)

This commodification of orphanages is well established in Cambodia, evidenced in the documents collected during the fieldwork of advertised events and cultural performances involving children from orphanages and pamphlets for other orphanage tours. As such, the tourism industry is capitalising on opportunities to make the most of the influx of well-wishers and good-doers (Reas, 2015). To get access to volunteers, the Home became part of the portfolio of a local NGO in coordination with an international sending organisation. Brokering activities involve cooperation between the local NGOs who organise the projects and the sending organisations who act as travel agents to sell projects as volunteering opportunities to volunteer tourists. The director of the local NGO reflects on their approach to adding projects to their portfolio.

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<sup>1</sup> The term refers to tours of orphanages and children’s home with children that suffer from the horrific effects of chemical weapons used by the United States during the Vietnam War (Brown, 2013).



*“We started from the bottom up. We went to projects that already existed and put them together and brought them together. And I think this is, and what I think makes, our approach stand out”* (Local NGO Director ML)

The sending organisations face a dilemma between profit maximisation and mission (Coghlan & Noakes, 2012; Devereux, 2008; Lacey et al., 2016; Tomazos, 2012). Like any other tourism operator, they must have attractive experiences/products within their portfolio of offerings to remain solvent. They must keep adding projects and destinations to offer more choices and competitive packages that they can successfully market to prospective volunteers/customers. The local NGOs act as local representatives for the sending organisations, offering extra services to make the volunteers’ stay as comfortable as possible and, in the process, diversify their business offerings. The local NGOs rent bicycles and scooters, offer paid access to washing machines, book bus tickets and excursions, and are keen to expand their services portfolio.

*“We should provide access to medical support for all volunteers. We can tap on the health passport for each volunteers and arrange- through their insurance provider- high standard medical care. We had over the years allergic episodes and other emergencies, so it would be good to have the medical record of each volunteer as well”* (Local NGO Director ML)

Drawing on the fascinating world of Phnom Penh and how things work in Cambodia, there is clear scope for what the director proposed. During our chat, ML revealed that when a tourist has an accident, there is a race between ambulances to get to them. Insured westerners are very profitable for local hospitals, and ML can see an opportunity there.

The Home has three members of staff, local women, who receive a stipend, but mostly get food to take home. These women are poor, uneducated, and grateful to be there doing their best to care for the children. However, despite their efforts, too many children require support and attention. This is evident even for things that are usually taken for granted in Western countries:

*“The babies should get more time on the floor, but they normally do not get much time as there are not enough carers. This affects their development, and there are signs of stunting in the development of their neck muscles (heads falling backwards)”*  
(Doctor from DWB)

#### **4.4 Obligatory Passage Point**

Using ANT, once the actors and problem have been identified, it is necessary to consider the commonality between the actors to understand better how they reach a consensus around an issue to obtain the expected benefits (Liu et al., 2021). In this phase, we focus on the challenges of management to make the most of the volunteers, identifying two non-human actors (the tourist industry and petty crime) and three human actors (the sisters, volunteers, and staff). A key recurring theme was the interaction between volunteers and staff. There were instances where the volunteers felt that the staff behaved appallingly.

*“Earlier in the morning we also got a taste of how the local employees/mammas choose to discipline the children. One of them was hitting a little girl; I saw two light slaps on the upper arm and legs...another momma was pinching a toddler to keep him*

*quiet- I was appalled. I spoke to the NGO director, and he is going to speak to the Head Sister” (Volunteer J)*

*“M and J were appalled that the fish the kids had to eat had bones. We were all very reluctant and even scared while feeding them as these bones looked difficult for the children to deal with. That got me thinking about meal times and what the children eat...it is all very healthy and I am sure the whole fish is demonised only in Western context (for its bones)...while in Cambodia you eat what you have” (Research Diary Notes)*

From a contrasting perspective, the local staff felt that the volunteers were too soft and spoiled the children; how would they survive outside the Home if the foreigners spoiled them?

*“After here, the children will go to another place with other children - children that have not been raised in a loving and caring environment; they are tough - they must be able to hold their own” (Staff S)*

On top of everything, they were annoyed by visitors taking pictures, saying that this privilege has to be earned.

*“We do not like people who just come in for an hour, or just a few days, just to take some pictures with the children. Volunteers that make a commitment and become part of the children’s lives, they are different. They earn the right to take pictures. That is*

*actually the only way we can repay them for their time and the love and care they gave to our children” (Staff S).*

#### **4.5 Interessement/ Enrolment**

In this **translation stage**, we consider interessement and enrolment together, as we explore how actors are convinced to get involved in solving the prescribed problems and how they set their roles (Huxford, 2010). We trace how an important actor, the local NGO director, works with others to push the vision of getting volunteers in the area to support local projects. In this stage, we identify three non-human actors (the sending organisation, local businesses and the government) and three human actors (volunteers, the NGO director, and the staff). As the NGO director also owns several of the volunteers’ accommodation premises, it is in his best interest to attract as many volunteers as possible. As the number of volunteers increased, the services of local staff also increased. The volunteers’ demand for new and more westernised services and products has also increased. Thus, the NGO and various local businesses seek new ways to make money from the tourists by making their stay more comfortable or by simply solving problems and showing them a good time. There were several examples of small businesses or people at their front porch providing smoked fish and laundry services to the tourists, but what was striking was the simplicity and the lack of barriers to becoming part of the ‘game’:

*“On the way back, I remembered I had to run an errand to the Russian market. I stood outside, no tuktuk; a little man on a motorbike stopped in front of me, and he offered a ride to the Russian market for 2,000 Reals (50 cents). I said ok- 5 min later I was at the market. On the way, I was thinking about how this lack of regulations and*

*restrictions operates in this economy. If you have a moto, you can pick up tourists and give them rides. It is cheap, not safe, and insurance companies would definitely have a heart attack, but it is convenient and simple” (Research Diary Notes)*

There were also five-a-side football pitches, beach volleyball and sweet treats that were not affordable to the locals. One service or product that stood out was Happy Pizza, which volunteers raved about.

*“Tonight we are all going to Happy Pizza. They serve overpriced pizza that the dough is infused with marijuana; we are very excited ...you do not get this back home”*  
(Volunteer M)

The formula appears simple, follow the volunteers, and there are opportunities. All that is needed is lax regulation, new ideas, and a constant supply of ‘orphans’, which does not motivate the stakeholders to tackle the structural causes or origin of the problem and has created a backlash against childcare-oriented volunteer tourism (Carpenter, 2015; Guiney & Mostafanezhad, 2015).

#### **4.6 Mobilisation**

The stability of the network largely depends on the relationship among actors in the network (Rodger et al., 2009), and many networks break down even after successful mobilisation (van der Duim & Caalders, 2008). It was uncovered that as the network of actors seeking to benefit from the presence of the volunteer tourists grew, so did the local NGO’s power, making them a broker or a conduit of volunteer access. Thus in this next stage of ANT, we see the creation of a much more extensive network. Consequently, the tourism servicescape

of the volunteers has gravitated closer to the volunteers' headquarters with significant effects. We identified two non-human actors (the tourism industry and petty crime) and the mobilisation of two human actors (the small business owner and the tuk-tuk driver offering excursions and bus driving services). As the servicescape shifted towards the volunteers, so did the 'crimescape'. It became apparent that volunteers became easy targets for pick-pockets, robbers, and scams.

*"One of the younger volunteers S, was very upset because a motorbike driver stole her purse with her iPhone, her expensive camera and \$50 in cash. The guy just approached her tuk-tuk and calmly took her purse from her hands, then while still driving he checked its contents and smiled at her"* (Research Diary Notes)

*"Another volunteer, E, as she was getting off her tuk-tuk a motorbike rider yanked the golden chain around her neck and vanished in the traffic. She was visibly shaken, and she had a clear mark on her neck where the thief had pulled"* (Research Diary Notes).

It also became apparent that the locals viewed the volunteers as naïve tourists.

*"Near the temple in front of a Buddha statue, two local men grabbed us by the arm, gave us incense sticks and showed us how to bow to the statue. When we tried to go away while thanking them, they said that we had to make a donation to the monks. Reasonable request, I thought, and I was about to leave a dollar and some change; no, that will not do! (One of them yelled); it is \$5 dollars minimum. We were a bit taken aback by this, but what could we do? We had already burnt the incense sticks,*

*and we had gotten our blessing from the Gods; we paid, and we moved swiftly away”*

(Volunteer E)

There were also worrying instances where the volunteers were followed home, resulting in the volunteers' headquarters resembling a fortress with razor-sharp barbwire at the balcony and terraces and heavy gates at the front. There were also daily briefings and instructions, accompanied by a strict curfew, that was easily breached with the help of the local staff trying to get friendly with the volunteers.

Local entrepreneurs saw the volunteers as an opportunity to profit by selling expensive treats. When approached, a local shop owner highlighted how he endeavoured to stock western goods and treats in his shop to sell to the volunteers. Finally, the local tuk-tuk drivers appreciate the opportunity of working for the volunteers, but operating from the stand opposite volunteer headquarters requires permission from the NGO. Getting access to the volunteers could be a goldmine for local drivers.

*“This group of 50 or so volunteers that live here are keeping me very busy. I can make \$12 a day only from one group of four volunteers- plus \$15 for trips to different sites and tours. Last week I was paid around \$300 to drive 11 volunteers to Siem Reap...that is a lot of money....so I borrowed a van. A few more trips like this and I might rent or buy one”* (Driver C)

#### **4.7 Blackboxing**

The blackboxing stage ultimately means that the practices and actions that underline the network will eventually lead to an institutionalised process. It becomes apparent that the need

to help the children solidifies the Head Sister's commitment to accepting volunteers. While reluctant initially, she can now see the volunteers' importance and what they bring to the Home and the children.

*“Before the volunteers came, some of the children will just sit in the corner, not smile and do not interact...the volunteers bring enthusiasm and energy that the children feed off and thrive on”* (Head Sister)

Thus, the appreciation for the volunteers and the importance of bringing them to the children is highlighted. It becomes apparent that the principal actor while accepting the benefits of volunteers to the children, had developed a scope for the potential of volunteer tourism, with concerns around what happens once the children leave this institutionalised setting:

*“In here, there are no poor children...out there are the poor children; at these places, the volunteers do not want to go, and the government does not want you to see- who wants to play with children that have dengue fever? Who wants to go somewhere with mosquitos and bad smells? These are the unlucky ones; the children here are taken good care of, get three meals a day and have the volunteers to play with- the problem is what happens next”* (Head Sister)

The Head Sister also highlighted the role of the government and their implementation of western standards as conditions to continue to receive international aid. What she noticed, though, was something that came as a surprise; a local system of patronage and cronyism that, in a fashion, exploits good causes.



*“We must work with government-approved NGOs and the local ‘oknya’. The ‘oknya’ is a wealthy donor who makes several donations in return for something. The politician says I will build you a bigger home for the children, and then the oknya has to build it. He can collect on his good deed later down the road”* (Head Sister)

Finally, the business side of accepting and using volunteers was also discussed as the Head Sister recognised the extra income from volunteers and the additional service to the poor they can deliver.

*“As you saw last week, we received 600 kg of rice on the pallets you helped store. These are from volunteer donations; now every Saturday, the poor people of the area will come; each will get 5 kg of rice, a bottle of fish oil, and one can of sardines”*  
(Head Sister)

#### **4.8 The Covid-19 Effect**

The pandemic had a devastating impact on the Home as the additional income and support from volunteers stopped. When looking at the effect, two non-human actors (Covid-19 and the local economy) and four human actors (the Head Sister, two local NGO managers, and the managing director of an international sending organisation) were identified. The Head Sister was approached via ZOOM in 2021 and noted the difficult time faced by the Home. In an almost defiant tone, she suggested that it is all down to God and what He decides for the Home.

*“We are very strict and rigid about the rules we apply to our work and our missions; first, we do not like to affiliate with any Christian or other political organisation. We are supported only via donations, and we never ask for support. Our Mother [Mother*

*Teresa] said that God will always provide...if not...then it is God-given that our time is up” (Head Sister: Follow-up interview)*

According to her, the daily operations of the Home have not been affected significantly. Still, they cannot run the foodbank or the medicine dispensary due to a lack of resources and social contact restrictions. When asked about the organisations not sending volunteers due to the 2019 Lumos campaign, she smiled and indicated that the volunteers did not stop coming. Pre-pandemic, while NGOs stopped sending volunteers for a while, their doors remained open for young people wanting to help the children.

*“Some young people kept coming to see the children and check what we were doing even during the lockdown. These people were not allowed to fly home, so they stayed here. They tell me that coming here makes them feel they are not wasting their time away from their loved ones” (Head Sister: Follow-up interview)*

This point about young people stranded in Cambodia was followed up with the local NGO manager quickly stating he does not have any volunteers at the Home, but some of the teaching volunteers on other projects are experiencing something similar to what the Head Sister described. His most important aspect was staying in touch with sending organisations, volunteers, and projects.

*“So we’re busy trying to keep contact with all the people that offered support to the schools. We’re trying to keep in contact with the partner projects, the partner organisations, sending organisations and trying to run a school that we’re having to*

*open and close and open and close and just have to close it again now because of this latest variation (delta)” (Local NGO M)*

According to M, the teaching projects were the ones that suffered the least due to a pivot to online teaching. All that was needed was resourcing the required equipment and tapping into their network of alumni volunteers:

*“We have moved to online. Maybe 30% of the income somehow gets around a smartphone. The volunteers come to us online, but we still hand out worksheets, homework and things like that. The kids come to the classroom, they all wear masks, and they follow the English lesson with the help of a big screen” (Local NGO M)*

The virtual placement route has proven a lifeline for M and his operations. However, S is worried about the impact of the pandemic and the uncertainty on her work.

*“We started everything from the bottom up; we went to projects that already existed and put them together and brought them together. So much work, so much effort, and now people are just desperate to know what comes next; but I do not know what to tell them” (Local NGO S)*

The managing director of a leading sending organisation was also approached to gain a more holistic picture of the sector. When asked about the extent of the impact of Covid-19, he highlighted volunteer decreases leading to “unavoidable cuts in our global workforce”. While suggesting schools and day-care centres had fared better than others, he pointed out that they would still suffer from the lack of volunteers and the funding that comes with them.

Nevertheless, all four identified human actors were optimistic when asked about the future. M quickly pointed out that the relationships and reputation his organisation has built over the years will help them to continue attracting volunteers.

*“When you are doing something in any business in any line of enterprise or business, you can fail people once. People are not stupid. You know if you do something crazy, you won’t get those guys coming back to you, but if you are doing what you believe to be ethical and right, then you’ve developed your own following of people who trust what you do; this will make them come back”* (Local NGO M)

Finally, when asked what needs to change when they start rebuilding post-Covid, the most striking sentiment was about empowering and trusting the locals. All four of the participants expressed their dismay at the pushed narrative of helpless and exploitable locals, which generates dependency and fosters a drip-fed support system linked to a stereotype-driven geography of compassion (Mostafanezhad, 2013), but the comment from M stood out:

*“Cambodians are often portrayed as powerless as amoeba flopping about just waiting for somebody to come along and do something. They say help the helpless, but they are not helpless I’ve never seen a more resourceful group of people than these guys”* (Local NGO M)

In summary, the findings show a symbiotic relationship between the locals and volunteers. The volunteers bring much needed funding, and the locals care for them during their stay. By meeting the needs of the volunteers, they exercise their agency and grow in power. In the process of the volunteers obtaining their experience and the locals benefiting financially, a

local orphanage has found a way to add to its available resources and enhance its charity footprint by tapping into the existing network.

## 5. DISCUSSION

This study proves that ANT is constructive in understanding how actors interact within volunteer tourism (Tomazos, 2020), considering the theory's translation phases (van der Duim & Caalders, 2008) at a children's Home. Our use of ANT considered a range of heterogenous actors that play equally important roles despite their perceived power asymmetry. Two key implications stem from this. Firstly, our study proposes that volunteer tourism at a children's Home can better be evaluated by understanding the interplay and interconnection between all the actors (human and non-human). Rather than paint all volunteer tourism operations with the same brush and dismiss them as harmful to children (Carpenter, 2015; Guiney & Mostafanezhad, 2015), this study showed that deployment of the phases of translation is critical for understanding the delicate balance that hinges on the presence of the volunteers on such projects. This also means that one could use phases of translation as a reference point for evaluating volunteer tourism projects.

Second, the analysis filled a gap in the literature by highlighting the interrelationships between stakeholders, emphasised by the ability of the principal actor and others in the network to learn new things, adapt to change and accept volunteer tourists for what they are – a tourism asset – and not what we wish them to be. This is paramount in managing the expectations of everyone involved. For example, at the start, the principal actor had no experience with what to do with the volunteers. She had to acquire knowledge and experience in dealing with the volunteers and other stakeholders, affiliating herself and the Home with a local NGO and, by extension, a sending organisation. The strong ethos of the operations

tempered the lack of experience in many ways at the Home and their commitment to the cause of helping the children, which creates a volunteer tourist mission culture that is then followed by others (Coghlan & Noakes, 2012; Devereux, 2008; Lacey et al., 2016; Tomazos, 2012).

It was interesting to observe that key actors did not set out to help the cause supported by the primary actor directly. **What we found was that people sometimes unintentionally helped to stabilise the network, even if they were not aware of its existence. Unknowingly through their actions**, they indirectly endorsed the work of the Home while also benefitting themselves.

The gravitational pull of businesses towards volunteers showcases how helping a good cause can be served when the interests of different parties and profits are brought together. The evidence shows that this was organic rather than planned by key actors. The presence of the volunteers signals opportunity and different actors in the network are encouraged to follow the volunteers and directly or indirectly support their work (Tomazos, 2020). **In the context of ANT, this means that the mapping of key actors needs to consider all actions and their intended and unintended consequences. It was later in our analysis that these relationships and effects emerged.**

Furthermore, the analysis revealed that the principal actor took on the responsibility of providing care for the children and supporting the local poor and sick. The principal actor understood the volunteers' added value and mobilised others (Dedeke, 2017) to help make the most of the new resources brought in by volunteer tourists. Setting up the weekly foodbank and medicine dispensary is evidence of that. **This perspective contributes to reconsidering the value and role of volunteers in such children's homes, reinterpreting them as assets utilised by the local actors. This counterbalances mainstream critical interpretations**

of volunteer tourism as the field in which powerful visitors who use the needs of the Global South for selfish gain and transformational experiences (Everingham & Motta, 2022; Mostafanezhad, 2013).

This study also questions the scope of what the literature calls the ‘orphan industrial complex’ that commodifies children as props (Guiney, 2018; Guiney & Mostafanezhad, 2015; Mostafanezhad, 2013). While the concerns in these papers are valid, it could be argued that the moral panic surrounding orphanage tourism stems from statistical evidence that does not accurately reflect the environment. For example, for a child to be deemed to meet the criteria of an ‘orphan’ both parents must be deceased. However, this is not the case for many of these children, yet they require support from the Home. Thus by reconfiguring the criteria, a more accurate understanding of the situation on the ground can be grasped, and the narrative can be considered more realistically and under parameters that reflect the lived experience of the children and those who care for them and not distorted by Western standards and misconceptions (Tomazos & Murdy, 2023).

The study also showcased the patronage system and the power locals can yield to volunteer tourism (Everingham & Motta, 2022). It became apparent that the actors that ‘control’ the volunteers can grow in influence as they can restrict or facilitate access to the volunteers. This trend is particularly pertinent to the case examined as the location of the volunteer’s headquarters was thirty minutes from the riverside. In many cases, if a tuk-tuk driver, excursion provider, or bar owner wished to get the custom of the volunteers, they had to go through them. This finding aligns with other studies that have identified the disproportionate empowerment of specific locals and networks as an international aid trap (Korf et al., 2010), suggesting that our interpretation of power relationships between volunteer tourists and locals

should be revised. This reverses the understanding of power relations highlighted in the academic literature in which there is one-way exploitation (Everingham & Motta, 2022; Mostafanezhad, 2013). Using ANT and its generalised asymmetry leads to the realisation that exploitation goes both ways regardless of existing power structures by recognising the agency and resourcefulness of the locals as exploiters and the benefits for volunteers.

In addition, the findings also highlighted the devastating impact of the pandemic on the Home and some of the primary actors. Like other tourist services providers worldwide (Mensah & Boakye, 2021; Zhang et al., 2021), the people providing accommodation to the volunteers lost their income, as did the staff that provided services to the volunteers and the local businesses that exclusively served volunteers were severely impacted. Notably, the primary actor missed the additional resources they used to further their charity work. A swift return of the volunteers is hoped to recommence the medicine dispensary and the food bank. Beyond the Home, the study also showed that Covid-19 had a significant impact on the priorities of local people and, by extension, on volunteer tourism projects. This changing of priorities jeopardises the foundations and the underpinning philosophies of projects built over many years, emphasising the argument that all the work these sending organisations, local NGOs, and projects have undertaken is threatened with little they can do to prevent the damage (Tomazos & Murdy, 2020). This vulnerability has long been understood in the volunteer tourism literature that questions the viability of projects without the presence of volunteers (Benson, 2015; Mostafanezhad, 2013; Wearing & McGeehee, 2013). While at a micro-level the presence of volunteers can make a difference and empower some locals, the reality is that volunteer tourism in its current form can do very little to reverse social structural inertia and the inequality of the North-South gap. In effect, these types of projects will always need volunteers, and the volunteers will continue to need the locals to gain access



to “tourism resources” to fulfil their goals. In this context, the volunteers and the children at the orphanage become valuable tourism resources.

## 6. CONCLUSION

While the academic literature has considered the principles and criteria for more responsible volunteer tourism, there is little work examining volunteer tourism using a qualitative framework such as ANT (Wearing et al., 2017). The study revealed key findings about how volunteer tourism hinges on a delicately balanced network of actors. The study’s primary actor was identified as the Head Sister, given her actions to attract and support volunteers at a children’s Home. Whilst Phnom Penh was not a blank slate with its long history of incoming volunteering and international aid, the findings show that while the principal actor did not create the network (Callon & Law, 1997; Latour, 2005), she quickly understood the best way to make the most of the presence and input of volunteers. She understood the scope and limitations of what the volunteers were willing to do and found a way to use them to further other avenues of assistance, for example, the foodbank and medicine dispensary.

Our use of ANT considered a range of heterogenous actors that play equally important roles despite their perceived power asymmetry. This insight leads the authors to the following six propositions. 1. Rather than paint all volunteer tourism operations with the same brush and dismiss them as harmful to children (Carpenter, 2015; Guiney & Mostafanezhad, 2015), we propose that volunteer tourism at a children’s Home can better be evaluated by understanding the interplay and interconnection between all the actors. 2. Projects with a strong ethos to serve a cause effortlessly create a volunteer tourist mission culture that is then followed by others (Coghlan & Noakes, 2012; Devereux, 2008; Lacey et al., 2016; Tomazos, 2012). 3. There are actors in the volunteer touristscape that sometimes unintentionally help the cause served by the volunteers regardless of being aware of the cause or not. Unknowingly through

their actions, they help with the activities at the Home while also benefitting themselves. 4. We need a more accurate understanding of the lived experience of the children in Homes and those who care for them free from assumptions based on Western standards and misconceptions (Guiney, 2018; Guiney & Mostafanezhad, 2015; Mostafanezhad, 2013). 5. Empowering the locals means accepting their agency and their propensity to exploit volunteer tourism for their ends. The generalised symmetry employed by this study recognises the agency and resourcefulness of the locals away from the narrative of one-way exploitation (Everingham & Motta, 2022; Mostafanezhad, 2013). 6. Volunteer tourism in its current form can do little to reverse social structural inertia and the inequality of the North-South gap. However, there is a symbiotic relationship that must be preserved. These projects will always need volunteers, and the volunteers will continue to need the locals to access “tourism resources” to enrich their stay and fulfil their goals.

Future work could analyse other examples of volunteer tourism and examine if the same phases of translation could be verified. Second, future research could explore if the experience of the primary actor in this study (Head Sister) in becoming part of an existing network is repeated elsewhere in volunteer tourism. Lastly, future work could consider translation phases across volunteer tourism projects and settings. The second phase of this study considered Covid-19 and highlighted the resourcefulness of some projects as new avenues of income, such as online teaching. While a reduction in tourists was evident, the findings show that the volunteers did not stop completely. However, restrictions reduced the amount of direct assistance available on the ground. Similarly, implementing the Lumos campaign to restrict volunteer tourism in children’s homes did not necessarily stop volunteers but led to interactions in different formats. Future research should consider the impact of banning such volunteer tourism practices. Further to this, as highlighted by local NGO

directors and emphasised by the pandemic, the narrative needs to change from helpless locals to resourceful locals.

Finally, this paper also contributes to the ANT literature. In the case of the primary actor, ANT literature typically assumes that they somehow become the main drivers of the translation process. As a result, they then get to define their interests and roles and the roles that others should play. In the process, principal actors are expected to convince others to accept the roles they have defined for them. Hence, the principal actor is defined to be a translator. In this case, the primary actor did not define the roles. For example, the volunteer tourist's role is highly institutionalised (Thompson, 2021), so she did not reinvent the wheel. Instead, she used the strong commitment as inspired by the teaching of the founder of the Home, and she inspired others to respect the work and the Home. She did not create a network but found a way to use the existing network to support her work. She engaged with a platform where potential contributors pursued their own goals and interests, increasing the scope of the services she and her sisters could provide for the local poor and needy. The analysis also showed that all key actors identified find space to pursue their interests in the context of volunteer tourism. Hence, this study posits that volunteer tourism in a setting is created by the actions of several small translators who interpret their role and their interaction to suit their needs, **thus calling future research to question the representation of volunteer tourism as an exploitative structure of asymmetrical power.**

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