Begging the Question: The Dilemma of Tourism and Street Children
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Abstract: This article examines the relationship between tourism and begging street children in destinations. It looks at one empirical study that has been made on the topic in Madagascar, and reviews travel guides and online travel information for advice to travelers about how to address begging and street children. Some sources strictly discourage any kind of giving, while others condone giving in-kind items such as water or other necessities. Most encourage charitable giving to local NGOs as an alternative. There is a lack of consensus on the relationship between tourism and begging street children. More research and discussion is due.
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In many parts of the world, street children beg from tourists. They present a complex dilemma. When a child, quite possibly one who lives in absolute poverty, looks a tourist in the eyes and asks for money, even the most mindful tourist faces a fog of doubt about the implications of her actions. Questions pile up. Am I being targeted because I am a tourist? If it weren’t for tourism, would this child still be begging? Or am I reinforcing a tourism-based begging livelihood? Or is a hand-out a question of survival? Is it inhuman not to give to a child in obvious need? Or is it better for the big picture? How do I give something? Or how do I say no? A discussion is due.

The root of the dilemma is the relationship between tourism and begging street children. Are the two correlated? Does this imply causality? “Responsible travel” is concerned that tourism may cause more child begging, essentially creating a livelihood of begging for street children. This position often recommends giving to trustworthy NGOs instead.

A second approach assigns tourism less causal weight. Street children were begging long before tourism. They would continue to beg even without tourism. Perhaps the presence of affluent foreigners is more a windfall for begging street children than a causal force. This stance is in the minority but deserves attention, as it aligns with a very raw instinct of compassion. It regards tourists more as individuals, and their decision more as a personal choice. Can giving money directly to a child in absolute poverty really be a negative thing? This approach is more likely to conclude that, in some cases, it is appropriate to give directly.

On the other end of the spectrum of approaches, a third stance sets a hard and fast “don’t give” guideline for tourists. This stance is usually relative to regions where child begging is associated with scamming and crime rings, such as India.

Examples of each of these three stances will be examined, but first some context is necessary.

The big picture

The past decade has seen huge increases in tourism in the least developed countries (LDCs) of the world, and in other low- & low-middle income countries. In fact, tourism in these countries is growing faster than in upper-middle income economies. According to the UN World Tourism report entitled “Tourism and Least Developed Counties: A Sustainable Opportunity to Reduce Poverty,” tourist arrivals in LDCs increased by 48%, contrasted to a growth of 34% in all developing countries and 17% worldwide. In 2005, the 50 LDCs received around 9.5 million tourists, and other low- and low-middle income economics received 163.5 million tourists (UNWTO, 2006).

In LDC destinations, the disparity of wealth between the tourist and the local population is dramatic, creating the conditions for very strained interactions. As R. Sharpley observes in The Tourist-Host Relationship, “The relative wealth of Western visitors to developing countries is a particularly visible
basis for an unequal relationship; in many instances, just the cost of the flight to some developing countries may be the equivalent of twice the average annual local income.”

So, tourism is relatively new in many of least developed countries, yet it is growing quickly. Has instance of child begging grown in proportion? Almost no empirical research has been done to test the correlation between the two. Perhaps this is due to the difficulty in defining street children and begging. Begging can often overlap with informal market activity such as street-vending, black market activity such as prostitution and drug trafficking, and illicit activity such as pick-pocketing, which complicates the picture. For example, if a child with a shoe-shine box offers to shine the shoes of a foreigner wearing sandals, is this begging?

One empirical case study of tourism and begging appeared in the journal *Tourism and Hospitality Research*. Researchers Stefen Gossling, Kim Schumacher, Marie Morelle, Ralf Berger and Nadine Heck gathered data in Antananarivo, Madagascar. The research focused on the subgroup of street children. The paper highlights some important characteristics that this subgroup shares with beggars as a whole. First, it is a “marginalized population group living in absolute poverty” (p. 132). Secondly, the article distinguishes between children on the street and children of the street. “Children on the street have parents or relatives who take care of them, and they work or beg on the streets, but sleep elsewhere. In contrast, children of the street live on the street” (p. 133).

This empirical study suggests that, at least in the case of Antananarivo, Madagascar, tourism and begging street children are not causally related. The study observes that “street children reported that they received money from both tourists and local residents … tourists and local residents donate equally as often, but tourists give substantially higher sums” (p. 142). The study concludes, “It should be clear that for those families living on the streets of Antananarivo, begging is a question of survival and not one of increasing wealth. As children themselves report that they would prefer to go to school, it can be assumed that begging is an outcome of absolute poverty, and not encouraged by tourism” (p. 145).

Additionally, a *Washington Post* article on the subject was printed in 2007. Journalist Lori Robertson notes that “It can be particularly difficult to watch young street children asking for coins or selling trinkets and photos of themselves to tourists. Travel didn’t create this problem: UNICEF cites some estimates of 100 million street children worldwide, not just in popular destinations.” This journalism agrees with the research that tourism may not be as causally related to child begging as it may seem.

**Responsible travel and the “give indirectly” response**

More and more travel guidebooks and websites feature a “responsible travel”-related section that sets some guidelines for travelers about how to minimize their negative impact and act respectfully toward sensitive cultures and natural environments. Many of these guidelines contain a short section about begging.

The Lonely Planet travel guide series is often regarded as the guidebook authority for travel to more adventure destinations in less developed parts of the world. Indeed, these guidebooks encourage travelers to inform themselves and to travel responsibly. According to the Madagascar study, “many
Tourists appeared to be very well informed about street children. They had read guide-books such as ‘Lonely Planet’ that have separate chapters on ‘poverty’ and ‘street children’, recommending that non-monetary donations should be given to street children and that support should be given to aid organizations” (p. 141).

The Lonely Planet Madagascar mentioned in the research gives the following tip: “Resist the urge to hand out money or gifts to those cute children in the villages and towns of Madagascar. Rather than helping them, you will be teaching them to beg from every new traveler they see. If you want to do something to aid those you meet, donate money to the local school or clinic instead” (p. 38).

Travel literature online voice a similar opinion. According to the responsible-travel.org website, “Always carefully evaluate requests for gifts and money. As a general rule, as difficult as it is, you should never give money to beggars. This is especially difficult with regard to children who are often kept out of school to beg as a form of income by their parents. By handing out money you are ultimately condoning these methods. If you want to give, then buy essential goods to hand out like food, water, blankets and toiletries. The most efficient way to help though is by supporting local and charities which can direct your money to the most needy in the most cost effective manner.”

Similarly, the “responsible travel” section of keystonejourneys.com advises that “Giving to children encourages begging. Many responsible tourism experts believe giving money to beggars simply encourages a begging culture and reliance on hand-outs. A donation to a project, health centre or school is more constructive.”

Likewise, bharataonline.com offers responsible travel guidelines with similar advice. “For an ethical and responsible traveler begging always poses a challenge. Even in the most difficult circumstances, you should never give money to beggars. In case you want to give something, buy essential goods like food, water etc. However, the best way is supporting locals and charities which would go to the needy person in the most effective way.” It is important to note here that the advice addresses all begging and not children in particular.

Finally, escapedtoperu.com takes a somewhat stricter stance toward donating in-kind items, but still suggests donations toward local charities. Its responsible tourism page has a begging section that recommends the following: “Don't give money, sweets or pens, especially to children. Giving to children only teaches them that begging is rewarding and can undermine parental authority. Children making money from begging are unlikely to go to school and so are more likely to be trapped in a cycle of poverty. It is far better to talk to and interact with children. Some sort of game, a song or simply exchanging drawings or photos can be more fulfilling and fun for both you and the children. There are a number of worthwhile charities which will ensure longer term benefits to a greater number of people if you wish to donate.”

These different online sources are certainly not a comprehensive look at travel advice online. They are simply a sample based on results from online searches using keywords such as “responsible travel,” “street children” and “begging children”. Most of the search results for “responsible travel” guidelines is that a direct monetary handout to a beggar is perpetuating long-term patterns of begging.
and is therefore unacceptable. However, in-kind handouts of food and other necessities are usually acceptable, as well as donations to relevant local NGOs.

**Personal choice and “in some cases, give directly” approach**

Forming a different stance are sources of advice recognizing that begging can be a survival tactic for certain populations and their only possible source of income. To them, following the locals’ example of donating to beggars is an acceptable, appropriate response. They recommend that travelers simply donate spare change to those who need it most. These sources tend to regard tourists less as a distinct group and more as individuals facing the same dilemma as local people when confronted with begging. This complicates the response, since the tourist is advised less to consider her role as a tourist and more to consider the particular place and situation of the beggar. These sources are more likely to point out the real need of specific kinds of beggars and to encourage a more direct response.

Travel website [mytravellersearth.com](http://mytravellersearth.com) encourages typical “give indirectly” response, but then acknowledges that direct responses of monetary handouts can be appropriate based on the real need of the beggar. “Whether or not to give to begging children and adults is a contested issue. In general, it is advisable to offer something for a small service rendered but not to encourage begging by giving money for nothing. That being said, certain members of some societies (e.g. landmine amputees and other disabled people in countries with no social security) may have no other way of making an income so giving a small amount can hardly be a bad thing.”

Similarly, travel website [Real Gap Experience](http://www.realgap.co.uk) has a responsible travel section that addresses begging in the usual “give indirectly” way, but then acknowledges that it is ultimately a personal decision and that it may be appropriate to follow local example and donate directly. The section reads, “One of the more controversial ‘Responsible Tourism’ ideas is the notion that you should think carefully before giving money to beggars or children. Many responsible tourism experts believe giving money to beggars simply encourages a begging culture and reliance on hand-outs and that it may be better to make a donation to an appropriate charity rather than individuals. Giving money to beggars is very much an individual thing and there are no hard and fast rules when it comes to this area of responsible tourism. As a general rule, though, if you see local people giving money or gifts to beggars then it may be more appropriate.”

Another travel website, [goeasteurope.com](http://goeasteurope.com), also acknowledges the real need of the beggars that a tourist may encounter. The site says, “Beggars in Eastern Europe are often truly needy. There are very little provisions made for the old, sick, disabled, or ethnic outcasts. If they don't beg, often they can't provide for themselves. In addition, physical or mental impairment may mean ostracization from society, including the workforce.” The site regards donating as a personal choice, then offers tips on how to donate carefully and safely. “If you want to give, give pocket change. Keep all of your change in a separate, easily-accessible compartment in your bag, so you can hand it out without loitering. Then you can move on in a hurry so you are in less danger of pickpockets.”
Much of the “give directly” advice pertains to marginalized adults. Child begging is even more delicate. An online magazine Travel Africa recently interviewed Gambian tourism development expert and International Responsible Tourism award winner Adama Bah. He was asked “How should tourists in Africa respond to begging, for example, people asking for alms or children demanding presents?” Adama Bah responded, “With adults asking for alms it is simple. You choose to give or not, as you would anywhere else. With children it is different: I would advise giving to institutions that protect children, such as schools and sponsorship organisations.”

Somewhat critically of the “give indirectly” response of responsible tourism, the “in some cases, give directly” travel literature suggests that begging is mostly unrelated to tourism, and that the tourist is to act as any local member of the community by making a personal decision about whether to donate money or not. This personal decision is to take into account that, especially for adult beggars, there is a real need and that begging is a survival tactic. According to the Madagascar study, this direct “do something” response may be the most common. “Regarding donations, 62 percent of the tourists had given money to street children” (p. 140) and that “leisure tourists may thus have supported street children in Antananarivo with approximately FMG960m (£101,500) in 2003” (p. 141).

Skepticism and the “don’t give” response

There are very few instances of advising a strict “don’t give” response in travel literature. Yet some sources will go into great detail about the possibility putting child beggars in dangerous situations, the possibility of begging as a scam or scheme, and the potential harm that donating money or even in-kind goods. However, the sources will often follow-up with a suggestion that donation to a trustworthy local NGO is a more effective way to respond in a more efficient way.

In India, instance of begging street children is high, their tactics are deceptive, and tourists are often targeted. In an online publication OhMyNews article entitled Child Begging in India Both a Scam and a reality, Munish Nagar interviews a begging street child in India. “Asked why he begs, he replies he is alone. Suraj said he does not have a home and that he stays at the temple. When I followed up on his story, however, I found that Suraj does have parents and that they also beg. When I asked why he lies to people and why he doesn't quit begging, he replied with a smile, ‘This is our ancestral business.' The children have many different methods in which they beg. Many of them go to tourist spots or places and beg foreigners for money.”

Consequently “begging” is listed under “scams” in some online travel literature. In the journals of worldnomad.com, the “begging” section reads, “A skinny child in ragged clothing or a mother with a crying baby asks you for money. There might be a heart-wrenching story or big sad eyes quietly burning into your guilty soul. Face to face experience with a beggar can be one of the most challenging aspects of travel. The reality is that over a billion people in the world live on less than $1 a day and truly need your help. Unfortunately however, begging is sometimes run as an organised business where kids are used as bait to tug your heartstrings and part with cash... which they'd be lucky to get a small slice of as most of it goes to a ringleader.”
Travel website travmonkey.com features an article with similar observations: “In the movie Slumdog Millionaire, we were shown how children are exploited for their puppy dog charm in the art of begging for the cause of crime rings. Our instinctive sympathy for children makes us, as westerners in a foreign land a great target for this slumdog marketing campaign.”

The online travel site goindia.com also illustrates the uglier side of begging in India and encourages a “don’t give” response. The site explains that “While the poverty is real, begging is quite often carried out in organized gangs. For the privilege of begging in a certain territory, each beggar must hand over their takings to the gang’s ring leader, who keeps a significant share of it.” The advice of the site is that “while it can seem heartless, it can be best to ignore these people. There are so many beggars, even if you want to give to them, it’s not possible to give to them all. Another common problem is that if you give to one beggar, such a gesture will quickly attract others.”

So, examples of a strict “don’t give” response in travel literature are rare and usually pertain to places such as India where the problem of begging has been complicated by crime-ring organization and tactics. These sources usually display the highest level of skepticism toward giving anything to begging street children, whether it be money or non-monetary items, and are even skeptical about NGOs and their failures to address the problem of child begging. Yet, most will still suggest donation to NGOs over any sort of monetary or even in-kind handouts to begging street children.

The question remains

There is no simple answer or general rule to follow for travelers confronted with begging, yet the situation is impossible to ignore. In Robertson’s article, she quotes Lucy Bertenshaw, the manager of the South American Explorers' club house in Cusco, Peru. The organization provides travel information, and Bertenshaw distributes a pamphlet that cautions travelers not to give money to children on the streets. Yet she herself had recently donated to a child street performer. Says Bertenshaw, “It’s such a moral dilemma ... It is hard to give good advice to people when you yourself find it hard as well.”

Madagascar is the only destination where the topic has been formally researched using empirical data. The study implies that tourism does not necessarily cause child begging, and that the economic contribution of donations to beggars is considerable. Would this money have entered the economy otherwise? Unlikely. Even so, the Bradt guidebook for Madagascar takes the strict “don’t give” position. The guidebook quotes a traveler who thinks it’s best to “just don’t give anything” and a Peace Corps volunteer who seems to think that “material presents are almost always destructive.” (p. 142)

Too much is unknown about the relationship between tourism and child begging. The topic is under-researched and under-debated. Even expert advice differs as to how tourists are to respond to begging children. Perhaps it is more effective to think of every encounter between a tourist and a begging child as unique and heavily contextualized rather than representative of the two larger phenomena of tourism and child begging. This way, the question changes from how tourism affects child begging to how one person can impact another.
Bibliography


