

# What Can Donors Do? The Role of Donors in Advocating for Family and Community-Based Care in South Asia

Institutionalised Children Explorations  
and Beyond  
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## Abstract

Elevate Children Funders Group (ECFG), a consortium of foundations dedicated to building strong families and a life free from violence for all children, strongly believes and supports the idea that children are best able to thrive and reach their full potential when they remain with their families and communities rather than living in residential care. Years of research has shown that orphanages often expose children to serious abuse, harm and neglect, can impact a child's physical and psychological development and is often much more expensive than family or community-based care. However, despite this evidence, the number of residential care institutions has been steadily or even exponentially increasing. Donors continue to invest in orphanages—drawing more children into institutions and away from families. To this end, this article will make a case for investing in families and communities rather than orphanages by putting a spotlight on ECFG member investments in Asia. By drawing on recent ECFG funding research and foundation investments, this article will highlight how donors can do more to help deinstitutionalisation efforts across the region.

## Keywords

Donors, funding streams, alternative care, family-based care

## Introduction

Elevate Children Funders Group (ECFG), which is a consortium of foundations dedicated to building strong families and a life free from violence for all children,

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strongly believes and supports the idea that children are best able to thrive and reach their full potential when they remain with their families and communities, rather than living in residential care.<sup>1</sup> Instead of investing resources to build residential care, we call upon philanthropists to invest in opportunities that build strong families and communities. It is critical that philanthropy be informed by evidence-based research and practice in making decisions about investing in children's future.

To this end, this article will make a case for investing in families and communities rather than orphanages, by putting a spotlight on ECFG member investments in Asia. By drawing on recent ECFG funding research and current regional investments, this article will highlight how donors can do more to help deinstitutionalisation efforts across the region.

## **Methodology**

This article is based on literature review of children's care journal articles, government documents, grey literature and on ECFG's recently commissioned funding stream analysis in Nepal, which examined the role private and government funding plays in promoting different forms of family-based and alternative care. With the information gathered via the research, the goal was for ECFG to organize a donor convening to explore how to influence better philanthropic giving.

The authors were also able to draw from their respective experiences of working with a collective of donors as well as with a foundation. ECFG is a consortium of 20+ foundations, and World Childhood Foundation is one of the members. ECFG holds regular closed-door, funder-only convenings to help funders connect and increase their knowledge of developments in the field. These forums have proven effective in understanding the gaps and challenges in respect to investment and helped to influence better philanthropic giving. The article draws from this learning as well as the individual member's engagement with investors.

## **Flows of Philanthropic Funding: Funding for Orphanages is Harming the Children It Aims to Help**

Years of research have shown that orphanages often expose children to serious abuse, harm and neglect, can impact a child's physical and psychological development and is often much more expensive than family or community-based care (Csáky, 2009; Pinheiro, 2006). This growing body of evidence, culminated in the UN welcoming the landmark document, *Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children*, which calls upon states to ensure that every child should live in a supportive family environment that promotes his/her full potential.

An unfortunate paradox is that during much of this progress, the number of residential care institutions has been steadily or even exponentially increasing. In Cambodia, for example, the number of institutions has increased by more than 75

per cent between 2005 and 2010 (The Royal Government of Cambodia, Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation, 2011) despite rapid economic development and the fact that as many as 80 per cent of affected children have at least one living parent (The National Institute of Statistics of the Royal Government of Cambodia and Columbia University, 2016). Put simply, these children in Cambodian orphanages and so many others like them elsewhere around the world are unnecessarily separated from their families and communities. There are excellent programmes worldwide, particularly in Asia, focused on supporting families, with proven results even in the poorest and most remote places. Local organisations and governments across the region, however, report that their efforts are hampered by the inflow of resources (often foreign) to residential care. Funding to residential care is in many countries also in direct contradiction to local legislation and policy, emphasizing that family-based options should be prioritized.

This has been confirmed by ECFG's research in Nepal, which has shown that private philanthropic support for vulnerable children often has a strong focus on funding of orphanages. The philanthropic giving is made up of foundations as well as individual donations. Despite the global evidence and best practice, donors in Nepal continue to invest in orphanages via donations, volunteer tourism, mission trips, etc.—drawing more children into institutions and away from families [Elevate Children Funders Group (ECFG), 2018].

According to the Government of Nepal, out of 11.6 million Nepali children, almost 16,000 children live in 585 registered orphanages located largely in cities and popular tourist destinations. In all, 98 per cent of child-related projects receive private funding solely from outside of Nepal. Also, 90 per cent of the orphanages received fundraising support from external partners only, mainly in Germany, the US and the UK (ECFG, 2018).

The ECFG commissioned study found that \$9.1 million of funding goes to the orphanage business in Nepal as compared to \$3.7 million to family-based care. An additional \$4.1 million in funding was recorded for alternative care projects, but it was not possible to identify how much of the funding had gone to family care and how much to residential care. Funding for other projects, such as education, health and children's rights, reached \$6.3 million (ECFG, 2018).

When investment goes into supporting institutional care, this results in lack of funding for supporting families and communities to thrive, preventing unnecessary family separation as well as family and community-based alternative forms of care. Research has shown that the cost of orphanages can be eleven times the cost of social services provided to vulnerable families and three times the cost of professional foster care, thereby undermining efforts to develop more sustainable alternatives (Browne, 2009).

While the global evidence is pointing at the power of communities and families, indigenous forms of care, and child and youth-led care arrangements, donors' investments continue to support residential care and further break down the familial and communal structures. These investments continue to further entrench the cycle in that donations give orphanage owners financial incentives to stay

open and to find new residents. Local systems are slow to change in response to new studies on the harm of institutions.

## **Do No Harm: Are Donors Aware of the Harm?**

There is an assumption made by practitioners and policymakers that donors are aware that orphanages cause harm. However, as the Nepal case study illustrates, majority of donors are not necessarily aware of this global body of evidence, and many see orphanages as a protective and safe space for vulnerable children. For majority of the donors as well as the general public, as experience garnered from ECFG donor convenings and its membership engagement with peer donors has shown, they still believe that orphanages are necessary and provide adequate care for children. They believe that orphanages provide children safety, care, health, protection and a sense of belonging, rendering services that can help a child thrive and grow. There is a continued underlying assumption that children do not have families to turn to—they are orphans—or if they do exist, they are ‘too poor’ to adequately care for them, and that communities do not have the capacity and resources to adequately provide the care and protection for these children. Many seem to believe (or fear) that divestment from orphanages would lead to immediate changes where many children are left behind without any form of services, or in the worst case scenario, are sent back to abusive families unable to care for their children. This, in turn, serves as an argument for continued support. For these donors, investments into communities and families are not seen as the answer.

To shift these donors’ perspectives and underlying assumptions, there is a need for more advocacy and behaviour change. Donors need to be made aware of the push and pull factors leading to children being placed in orphanages—poverty, lack of education or health services, disability of a child or caregiver, or substance abuse within the family. Increased awareness is also needed about practical options to orphanages and what a shift from residential care to community and family-based care could look like on both large and local scales in relation to specific orphanages. Investments should focus on supporting social development, child protection and trafficking reduction. And, by directly investing in communities and families—improving education and health services, supporting family services and increasing family-based alternatives—many children will be able to thrive and grow. For those children to whom family is not a viable option, alternatives need to be put in place.

There is also a second assumption that knowledge about the harmful impacts of institutional care can shift donor behaviour. As an ECFG member’s experience has shown, even when donors are aware of the scientific research and strong evidence base, their funding practices may not shift. For many, evidence in Eastern Europe does not apply to a remote community in South Asia. The families are too poor to care for their own children, and science may not apply to these cases. To shift donor behaviours and influence donor awareness motivations, it takes a great deal of time and trust. This may involve one-on-one engagement

between donors, as experience from ECFG convening and member donor engagements has shown. Donors trust one another and efforts need to be made to create closed-door spaces for donors to engage in dialogue and share learnings and promising practices in grant making. By creating these safe spaces, donors can also share learnings regarding how they are shifting their investments to strengthen communities. One way to help donors understand that change is possible is to highlight promising investment practices of their peers. This can involve faith-based donors, high worth individuals, bilateral donors and foundations. This works takes time, patience and flexibility, and it may take years to see significant gains.

There is also the added challenge that practitioners and policymakers have so far crafted a stronger narrative around the harms of institutional care as opposed to cost-effective solutions. In order to shift funders' investment models, there is a need for a stronger body of evidence related to cost-effectiveness.

May be a bridge from the previous text? For example: One example of practical interventions is the World Childhood Foundation which has worked on deinstitutionalisation and development of family-based options ever since it was founded 20 years ago. Efforts have been made to engage with key Swedish stakeholders to encourage divestment from orphanages and promote alternatives. In a new initiative implemented together with a faith-based partner organisation, information about the risks of orphanage volunteering and the consequences of funds being channelled to residential care are published online, where key information has been compiled targeting volunteers, travellers and funders of residential care. Over the coming three years, the initiative will include resources for direct work with faith-based groups supporting orphanages abroad as well as research on links between residential care and abuse, increased inclusion of children's voices and concrete support to the development of family-based alternatives in Thailand, Cambodia and South Africa.

## **Philanthropic Funding: Strengthening Families and Communities**

While a significant number of donors are continuing to invest in orphanages, there are a few philanthropists including ECFG members who are investing in strengthening families and communities. These philanthropists are being informed by evidence-based research and practice in making decisions about investing in children's future.

Several ECFG members' investments in Asia are supporting interventions that support families and family and community-based alternatives, rather than institutional care. These efforts include providing funding for various approaches such as family strengthening services, supportive social services and government policies aimed at empowering youth.

ECFG members have provided the following types of investments:

- Supported organisations involved in operating orphanage care to move their focus to family and community-based care. Members have not ceased funding to a partner orphanage until a full transition has been made to family-based care services, to minimise risks to children's health and well-being.
- Supported the formation of coalitions with the relevant local authorities and local organisations to ensure a coordinated, joint approach to the provision of services for children and families.
- Funded care leavers who are now young adults and need employment and life skills.
- Supported the promotion of the understanding that children should be in families, not orphanages.
- Supported investments that highlight challenges faced by children with disabilities in the deinstitutionalisation process.
- Promoted child participation and structured methods for including children's voices in placement decisions.

ECFG member investments illustrate how funds can be better spent on preventing the separation of children from their families and on services that ensure the best interest of a child, as illustrated by the following case studies from Cambodia, Nepal and India. These are just a few of the many examples of how alternative forms of care are supported in practice, many of which may be undermined by the large investments going to residential care institutions.

In Cambodia, World Childhood Foundation and GHR Foundation (along with other foundations) are supporting a local organisation, M'Lop Tapang. M'Lop Tapang was founded in 2003 with the goal of giving street children access to learning tools, specialised services, resources and opportunities needed to build a better future. The overall objective is to contribute to an environment where children are 'allowed to grow up in their families feeling safe, healthy and happy, a society where all children are respected and treated equally'. M'Lop Tapang addresses the needs of over 4,500 vulnerable children and their families by offering regular meals, shelter, medical care, education and training, counselling and protection against all forms of abuse.

Through funding by GHR Foundation and World Childhood Foundation, M'Lop Tapang has been able to provide social work-based services to vulnerable children and youth who have been or are at risk of separating from their families. In collaboration with local authorities, the local community and other child-focused organisations, the M'Lop Tapang team of experienced social workers and support staff has kept at-risk families together, reintegrated children with birth families when possible and provided safe, temporary, community-based housing options for children in transition to family care. M'lop Tapang assists with the family reintegration of street children living in Sihanoukville by supporting children to attend schools or training programmes, creating income generation opportunities for the families and substance abuse rehabilitation services for the children and youth. These investments have also contributed to the provision of

case assessment/case management, transitional living, foster care, family strengthening and community education services.

Since 2000, Asha Nepal has helped to raise the socioeconomic status of survivors of sex trafficking and mothers having HIV and their children in Nepal. Since its inception, Asha Nepal was aware of the impact of institutional care but also recognized that temporary shelter or small group homes are needed as temporary safe spaces for children and young people at risk. Since 2014, World Childhood Foundation is supporting Asha Nepal to strengthen families, empower mothers and their children and implement family reintegration efforts in a safe and timely manner. The mothers and children are provided continuous follow-up and community support services. By supporting the families and communities of the survivors, Asha Nepal helps to prevent unnecessary family separation and institutionalisation of children.

In India, there is increasing momentum for strengthening alternative care for vulnerable children, including the 2.4 million children living in registered and unregistered childcare institutions (CCIs). UBS-Optimus Foundation has awarded a grant to Miracle Foundation in 2019 to build the capacity of more than 1,400 government officials across four states in alternative care standards. From among these officials, a cadre of master trainers will be formed who will support CCIs in the states to reunify children with families. Included in the grant are pilot programmes that will demonstrate the impacts of reintegration on children with their families and how to strengthen families to prevent separation of children in the first place.

## **Conclusion**

Millions of children in Asia and around the world are not able to grow and thrive within their own families and communities. They are deprived of the opportunity to learn their families' language, practice their families' faith and receive the nurturing care and protection needed to grow and thrive in today's complex world.

Donors need to ensure that all their investments support social development, child protection and trafficking reduction. They need to prioritise investments in the strengthening of health, protection, education and community-based support services that make it possible for families to care for their own children.

Much more work needs to be done to shift investments away from orphanages and towards opportunities that build strong families and communities. By building upon the existing body of evidence and promising donor practices, we can begin to make these shifts to help deinstitutionalisation efforts in Asia and around the world.

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**Note**

1. Throughout the article, we will be using the terms orphanages, institutions and residential care interchangeably.

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